

WARREN W. WIERSBE

Bestselling author of *On Being a Servant of God*

ON  
BEING *a*  
LEADER  
*for* GOD



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WARREN W. WIERSEBE



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Dedicated to the memory of

Bob Cook, Ted Engstrom,  
Theodore Epp, Lee Roberson, and Richard Winchell,  
godly men who by their example and encouragement  
taught many of us the meaning of Christian leadership

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Leaders hold their positions purely because they are able to appeal to the conscience and to the reason of those who support them; and bosses hold their positions because they appeal to fear of punishment and hope of reward. Leaders work in the open, and bosses in covert. Leaders lead, and bosses drive.[\[1\]](#)

Theodore Roosevelt

## Preface

Each generation needs to discover and train new leaders, not only to meet current needs but also to prepare for future challenges and changes. Whether it's in a manufacturing plant or a local church, life goes on, and that life will either have direction and succeed or wander aimlessly and fail. The philosophers and strategists tell us that the future isn't what it used to be. Seeing how rapidly things are changing in our world, I suspect they may be right. "Change is the process by which the future invades our lives," wrote Alvin Toffler in the introduction to his bestselling book *Future Shock*,[\[2\]](#) and his choice of the verb "invade" was a wise one.

This book is meant to be a companion volume to *On Being a Servant of God*, originally published in 1993 by Oliver-Nelson and reprinted in 1999 and 2007 by Baker Books. The response to the book has been positive, and I'm grateful for the ministry it continues to have. I should point out that this present book is not a detailed manual about hands-on management. Rather, it seeks to present a practical "theology of leadership" based on the principles taught and illustrated in the Bible. It is encouraging to see that some recent "secular" manuals on leadership are echoing biblical principles, whether the authors recognize them or not. The experts are catching up with us!

Those who have read *On Being a Servant of God* will not find it duplicated in these chapters, although some basic concepts will be recognized. The two books go together.

Warren W. Wiersbe





**I**t's remarkable what weird ideas some people have about leadership.

This story may be apocryphal, but I've met it often in my reading. During the French Revolution, a man was seen running after a crowd that was moving toward the barricades in Paris. A friend begged him to stop, because the mob he was following was no match for the troops at the barricades. But the man kept running and shouted back, "I must follow them—I'm their leader!"

A Russian Aeroflot jet crashed in Siberia in 1994, killing all seventy-five people aboard. When the authorities listened to the black box recording, they discovered that the pilot's sixteen-year-old son and twelve-year-old daughter had been alternately at the controls of the plane! When the boy pushed a certain pedal, the plane went into a spin 1,300 feet above the ground. The crew pulled the plane out of the spin, but not soon enough to gain the altitude needed—and the plane crashed. The pilot's last recorded words were, "Everything's fine . . . take it easy . . . take it easy I tell you!"

When I pondered that newspaper report, I thought of the words of the prophet Isaiah describing the political situation in ancient Judah: "Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling. . . . Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon

themselves. . . . Youths oppress my people. . . . My people, your guides lead you astray; they turn you from the path” (Isa. 3:8, 9, 12). Effective leadership can benefit from experiments, but experiments must be balanced by experience. The young may be daring but the adults must be wise. Leaders must have the kind of maturity that comes from fighting battles and carrying burdens, maturity that is painfully developed in the school of life.

Two more stories.

During a presidential election year, a church officer said to me, “We should pray that [naming a candidate] will be elected president.” When I asked him why, he replied, “Because he’s born again and the Lord will show him how to lead the country.” I asked him, “Have you ever noticed the dumb things some church leaders do and then claim the Lord told them to do it?” There was no reply. He had been a church officer too long to argue over the matter.

Vance Havner used to tell about the time General Stonewall Jackson needed to get his army across a river, so he ordered the engineers to build a bridge. He also told his wagon master to get the wagon train across the river as soon as possible once the bridge was completed. The wagon master—a former blacksmith—got a group of men together, and with rocks, logs, fence rails, and various other materials, they built a bridge and got all the wagons and artillery over the river safely. Early the next morning the wagon master reported this to General Jackson, and the amazed general asked, “Where are the engineers?” The wagon master said, “They’re over there in a tent, drawing pictures and planning a bridge.” Vance Havner’s comment was, “We need a few blacksmiths to get us over the river.”

I’m neither an engineer nor a general, but I find myself identifying with that wagon master, because during most of the sixty-plus years of my ministerial life, I’ve been a bridge builder. It’s been my calling to move people and equipment “over the river” into better situations for getting the job

done. Most of my friends would consider me a preacher and writer rather than a “leader,” but I did try to do my best when I was given that calling, and at least I was willing to learn.

The Frenchman bravely following the mob wasn’t a leader; he was a cheerleader, concerned primarily with pleasing his crowd and his own ego. The jet pilot was depending on technology to carry the flight safely through, but technology is only as good as the skills of the people who manage it. The church officer assumed that membership in the family of God was the only requirement for leadership, an assumption that automatically disqualifies thousands of very successful leaders who have never trusted Christ. As for the bridge builders, General Jackson assumed that the engineers’ training and experience guaranteed vocational efficiency. After all, engineers are supposed to solve problems, not create them. Given the materials and enough time, they could have built that bridge, but by the time they finished, it might have been too late to make good use of it. A diploma on the wall is a big help if it represents a balanced education, but it isn’t a guarantee of achievement.



Like most achievers, leaders are both born and made. They are born with physical and mental abilities and, if born again, they possess spiritual gifts in addition to their natural abilities. There is a gift of leadership, and if we possess that gift, we must use it diligently (Rom. 12:8). The New English Bible reads, “If you are a leader, exert yourself to lead.” You don’t “fill” an office; you *use* it for the good of the organization and the glory of God. Successful leaders learn from both study and experience, and they find great fulfillment in seeing their co-workers discover and develop their own skills as they serve together. True leaders have

the ability and the humility to select associates who are potential leaders. They surround themselves with people who can help them get things done. True leaders and followers gladly learn from each other.

The leaders mentioned in the dedication of this book all contributed to my ministry in many ways. They taught me that everything rises or falls with leadership, and that leaders must be servants of all. They taught me that the *why* of leadership is as important as the *how*. “He [the Lord] made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel” (Ps. 103:7). The Israelites knew *what* God was doing, but Moses knew *why* God was doing it. As someone has said, “The people who know *how* will always have jobs, and the people who know *why* will always be their bosses.” These men taught me that leaders are second in command and need to keep in touch with the Master if they want to get the job done. They showed many of us the efficient management of organizations involving multitudes of people in numerous nations, supported by many thousands of friends in North America. The word “globalization” hadn’t yet gotten into the evangelical vocabulary when I started my ministry, but these leaders certainly knew how to practice it.

One of the most important lessons I learned is that leaders focus on *purposes* while managers are primarily concerned with *processes*, and that both of them must keep in touch with the people involved. Managers keep processes healthy and productive and never make changes that violate the vision statement of the organization. Leaders and managers need each other. Leaders are primarily concerned with *vision* and *revision*, while managers focus on *supervision*. Leaders see the big picture and never forget the controlling vision statement of the organization. They know that to ignore the vision statement is to put the organization on dangerous and costly detours. One management guru reminds us that managers are people who do things right

while leaders are people who make sure they do the right things.

In the early days of Youth for Christ International, expansion was so rapid that the organization was soon involved in many diverse ministries. It became like that mythical centipede who was asked by a beetle how he knew which leg to move next, and the more he considered the question, the more helpless the centipede became. I think it was Bob Pierce who first pointed out YFC's "expansion paralysis" at a board meeting and subsequently founded World Vision to help feed, clothe, and heal the needy peoples of the postwar world. Somebody else took over ministry to the armed forces, and so on, until the word "Youth" in "Youth for Christ" really meant the teenagers of the world.

The American industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie said, "Here is the prime condition of success: Concentrate your energy, thought, and capital exclusively upon the business in which you are engaged." The apostle Paul agreed with this counsel when he wrote, "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14). As Dr. Laurence J. Peter wrote, "If you don't know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else."

In the chapters that follow I want to "unpack" the following definition of Christian leadership. It's not the last word on the subject, but it has been forged out of my Bible study, reading, and research, plus my personal ministry experience and discussions in seminars over the years. The definition is not inspired, but I think it is insightful and can help us get a grip on the work God has called us to do.

*Christian leaders are people who, by faith, willingly use their character, abilities, authority, and opportunities to serve others and to help them*

*reach their fullest potential, to their benefit, the benefit of the organization,  
and the glory of God.*



**B**ack in the fifties, a highly respected business magazine dramatically announced on the cover a feature article about computers. The headline read: COMING! THE PAPERLESS OFFICE! I've been waiting for years for that office to appear because I'm tired of being surrounded by paper generated by printers from two computers and a fax machine. We may one day see paperless offices, but I doubt we will ever see people-less offices, because somebody has to program those computers to send and receive emails and to process the manuscripts and other documents people create.

The president of a large dairy gave me and my wife a personal tour of the plant, and I was surprised to learn how much of the processing equipment was run by computers. The numerous pipes and hoses had to be cleansed and sanitized several times a day, and computers controlled the equipment that accomplished those important tasks. My father worked for the Borden Dairy for many years, and I recall as a child looking through a large glass window and seeing men and women in white uniforms cleaning the equipment in preparation for the next delivery of raw milk. Today dairies have people-less equipment—except for the people who program those indispensable computers.

No matter how we examine the matter, *we cannot do without people*. Even the Lord God needed Adam and Eve to help tend the garden, and this was before sin had arrived on the scene. Work isn't punishment; it's nourishment, development, encouragement. Jesus told His disciples, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34). "Six days you shall labor" is as much a part of God's holy law as "You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:9, 15). In fact, people who are able to work but won't work are just like thieves (2 Thess. 3:6-15).

It is certainly condescension on God's part to share His work with us, Adam and Eve's fallen descendants. Whether we realize it or not, whenever we sincerely pray "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we are volunteering to do our share of that work. After hearing God's gracious promises and plans for him and his family, David asked, "Who am I, Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?" (2 Sam. 7:18). Why would God pay any attention to us? Because He loves us and rejoices to share His boundless grace with us. He delights to see His people mature and become better collaborators. We can't explain all the details of this remarkable relationship, but we are invited to enjoy it.

In the Christian life, leadership is more than setting goals and motivating people to attain them, and leadership certainly isn't "bossing people around." Christian leadership is the overflow of a life dedicated to pleasing God and serving others so that we can together accomplish the purposes for which the Lord called us together. No one can do it alone, and no group can do it together apart from effective leadership. More about this later.

Because leaders are people—men and women made of the dust and destined to return to the dust—we have all the advantages and disadvantages of humanity. We have flaws and weaknesses that must be compensated for by our associates, which means that we need each other and can't



avoid influencing each other. Leaders make mistakes, admit them, and ask God and people to forgive them. Then they go back to work and seek to do better. Moses lost his temper (Num. 20:1-13), and twice Joshua ran ahead of the Lord (Josh. 7; 9). To escape danger, David masqueraded as a crazy man (1 Sam. 21:10-15), and to make money, King Jehoshaphat went into the shipping business with wicked King Ahaziah, and the Lord wrecked all their ships (2 Chron. 20:35-37). As for our Lord's twelve apostles, they, too, had their failings—and so do we.

Angels serve God better than we do, except for one thing: angels have never experienced the grace of God; and it is by the grace of God that we serve our Master. "But by the grace of God I am what I am," wrote Paul. "I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10; see also Eph. 2:10). Because we depend on God's grace, He is the one who receives all the glory. During my years as an itinerant Bible teacher, I occasionally found myself in a vibrant congregation where the ministry was truly glorifying God. But I saw no special connection between the great blessing we enjoyed and the staff personnel. They seemed to be ordinary men and women, without glitz or glamour, but they all had one thing in common: they depended on the Lord and didn't care who got the credit as long as God received the glory. As Bob Cook used to tell us, "If you can explain what's going on, God didn't do it."

Because I'm only a person, a human being, I must wholly depend on the Lord if I want to accomplish His will. Many times I've had to pray, "Lord, help me," and He has never failed. The minute we start depending on our talents, training, personality, experience, or past record, we start to forfeit God's blessing. The Scottish novelist George MacDonald wrote, "In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably—or succeed more miserably." I once heard Vance Havner describe his reaction to speaking at

the dedication of an elaborate and expensive church building: "The congregation thought the event was a milestone, but it looked to me like a millstone." The church family enjoyed "miserable success" indeed.

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). The Lord has many ways of reminding us that we are made of clay and not of steel. As I visited a pastor friend in the hospital, he lay in the bed complaining about his circumstances, and I quietly said, "God's Word says, 'He maketh me to lie down.'" His only response was, "Yes, I preach that to other people." Sometimes we have to "preach it" to ourselves and remember that we are jars of clay.

To remind us that He is the potter and we are only the clay, God may use sickness, injury, a thorn in the flesh, family problems, the death of a friend or loved one, or the sudden interruption of our plans to remind us of our status. No matter how many handy gadgets we own to help us keep connected and on schedule, we must admit with David, "My times are in your hands" (Ps. 31:15). I confess that I hate to wait, yet often the Lord stops me dead in my tracks and *makes* me wait. It's another loving reminder that I'm a clay pot, not the Lord of the universe.

Leaders are people and they work with people, and we all have the same human limitations and need the same divine helps and encouragements. Jesus said it clearly enough for a three-year-old to understand it: "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). When it comes to leadership, Jesus is not only the source of our wisdom and strength, but He is the perfect example for us to follow. "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing" (John 5:19). "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). He said to the Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do"

(John 17:4). I hope I can say that when I arrive at the throne of God!

So, instead of looking at our frail humanity and complaining about our deficiencies, let's joyfully accept our humanity with all its potential and ask God to help us make the most of it. David asked the Lord, "What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:4). What are mere mortals? *We are the precious objects of God's love!* If the Lord has called you to be a leader, it's because He knows you better than you know yourself, because He loves you, and because He planned it all before time began. Your genetic structure was designed by God so you could do the work He has called you to do (Ps. 139:13-16).

Leaders are people—God's people—God's chosen people—chosen to do His will and His work, and to help others to do His work. His promise is, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).



**T**he widespread influence of modern media, combined with the ravenous appetite of the public to identify with “the rich and famous,” has produced a society that can quickly manufacture celebrities. Once manufactured, celebrities are followed and photographed, and their words and actions recorded. But when God wants to make a leader, He takes all the time He needs. Celebrities are usually meteorites that quickly burn out, but leaders are steady stars that point the way for us in the dark. Or, to change the image, celebrities usually go up like rockets and come down like rocks, while leaders quietly keep on climbing and serving.

Consider Joseph, for example, a leader the Lord nurtured in three different “soils.” He was born into a divided Jewish family where his older brothers hated him and his father pampered him. Then God made him a servant in a prominent Egyptian home where the temptations were intense, and finally God allowed him to be thrown into prison for graduate studies in submission and service. God took thirty years to prepare Joseph to be the second in command of Egypt. God isn’t in a hurry.

Moses was influenced first in a loving Jewish home and then in an Egyptian palace. After Moses fled from Egypt at age forty, he spent forty more years tending his father-in-

law's sheep in Midian. Then God called him to forty years of difficult service leading Israel, but Moses was prepared. Joshua experienced trials in Egypt and then the discipline (and honor) of being Moses's personal servant before God made him Moses's successor. Leaders must learn to obey before they have the privilege of asking others to obey them.

As a child, Samuel learned to listen and obey, and then God called him to be a judge and a prophet. David, like Moses, got his leadership training caring for sheep, and he killed a lion and a bear before he killed the giant Goliath. Even Jesus lived humbly in the despised town of Nazareth and worked in Joseph's carpenter shop before He left Nazareth to begin His brief public ministry. Thirty years of obscurity plus three years of ministry produced a finished work for eternity.

It's interesting that some of God's choicest servants resisted His call and insisted that they couldn't do the job. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" asked Moses as he argued with the Almighty (Exod. 3:11). Moses tried to end the discussion by saying, "Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else" (Exod. 4:13). "Here am I, send Aaron!" But the Lord turned a deaf ear and drafted Moses for the job.

Gideon was threshing wheat when the Angel of the Lord showed up, sat down under a tree, and said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior" (Judg. 6:11-12). Mighty warrior indeed! He was hiding in a winepress! Gideon responded with a profound theological question that the Lord completely ignored, but the Lord didn't give up. When Gideon asked for double proof that God would keep His promise of victory, the Lord graciously condescended to grant his requests, and then Gideon couldn't escape. Gideon obeyed God's orders and did become a mighty warrior, just as the Lord predicted.

When God's call came to young Jeremiah, he responded with what he thought were two excellent reasons for not obeying: "Ah, Sovereign LORD . . . I do not know how to speak; I am too young" (Jer. 1:6). But the Lord would have none of it. "Get yourself ready!" God told him. "Stand up and say to them whatever I command you" (Jer. 1:17). Before he could come up with another excuse, Jeremiah found himself ordained a prophet of Jehovah, and he served faithfully for forty years. God had set His eye and His heart on Jeremiah even before he was conceived.

If we desire to become leaders for God, we must give ourselves totally to the Lord and obey whatever orders He gives us (Rom. 12:1-3). He wants my heart so that I will serve Him joyfully out of love, for service without love is drudgery. He asks for my mind because I must know both His will and how to do it if I am to serve Him intelligently. Zeal without knowledge is dangerous and destructive. My will must also be yielded to the Lord so that I willingly obey what He commands me to do. After all, the will of God is the expression of the love of God for us (Ps. 33:11).

If we don't love God, we will not truly love our co-workers and the other people who come into our sphere of influence; and then leadership will become dictatorship. The key word will be "authority" and soon we will become "authoritarian." Leaders who must repeatedly remind others who is in charge are either running scared or just plain egotistical. I recall one company president who prefaced his "official" opinions with, "As the first officer of this corporation . . ." Real leaders don't have to remind you where they sit or who put them there. They prove they are in charge by leading successfully, and that includes listening to you, being concerned for you, and helping you become a better worker and leader in your own sphere of service.

Like Jonah, unwilling leaders may get things done and even bring some blessings to the organization, *but they themselves will not be a part of that blessing!* Jonah in his

anger sat outside Nineveh (where he ought to have been ministering), hoping God would destroy it. In his stubborn pride, he was missing a priceless opportunity for spiritual growth (Jon. 4). The prodigal son's older brother stood sullenly outside the family home, giving vent to his envious anger, when he could have been enjoying fellowship at the feast and experiencing the joy that comes when we forgive others and God forgives us (Luke 15:25-32).

It's possible to be a blessing to others and yet not experience the blessing ourselves. That's why David prayed, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Ps. 51:12). If our hearts are not right, our service will be a burden and not a joy, and then we will become a burden to others.

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Prov. 4:23).



**I**n our definition of leadership, the little phrase “by faith” is not a pious decoration. It’s an important obligation, because “everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23), and that includes leadership. The leaders in Hebrews 11, named and unnamed, all served God by faith; and though the unnamed believers (note the word “others” in the middle of verse 35) may have looked like failures in the eyes of the world, they were successes in the eyes of God and duly rewarded for their faith. Leaders must be men and women of faith, people who “live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

I recall being a guest at the board meeting of a very respectable ministry and listening to a discussion of their financial needs. Their budget wasn’t extreme, nor were the leaders extravagant, but the times were difficult. Finally the chairman said, “Well, we will just have to trust the Lord and minister by faith.” Several of the board members nodded their heads in agreement when another member quietly asked, “Whose faith?” She knew that having faith in God isn’t the same as having faith in faith, because faith is only as good as its object.

A popular vocalist used to sing a song declaring that he believed a flower grew for each drop of rain that fell, but nobody with any common sense believed him. If that song



were true, we would be over our heads in flowers! Sentimental faith is fine for greeting cards and popular songs, but not for success in Christian service.

For the believer, faith means *obeying God in spite of the circumstances around us, the feelings within us, or the consequences ahead of us*. The real evidence of faith isn't lustily singing a hymn or lazily reciting a creed but lovingly obeying what God tells us to do *in spite of everything*.

George Muller used to say, "The only way to learn strong faith is to endure strong trials," and the record in Hebrews 11 bears this out. Noah's faith made him look like a fool for 120 years. People asked him, "Rain? What's rain?"

Abraham's faith made him leave home not knowing where he was going, and then offer his son and heir on the altar, not knowing how God would fulfill His promises. The faith of Moses brought Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, and the faith of Joshua brought them across the Jordan and into the Promised Land, but both men first had their share of trials.

*A faith that can't be tested can't be trusted.* The seeds of faith are planted in our hearts as we read and ponder "the word of faith" (Rom. 10:8 NASB), but those seeds must be watered and nourished by the love of God as it works through the storms of life. Our "faith muscles" are exercised in the difficulties of life just as an athlete's muscles are exercised in the gymnasium or on the court or playing field. As we move ahead by faith day by day, we must expect opposition, but we must not allow opposition to discourage us or distract us. The prophet Isaiah wrote about Jesus, "In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged" (42:3-4). If our faith is grounded in God's Son and God's Word, and if our aim is to glorify God alone, we can depend on the Lord to see us through; and our faith will be stronger in the end.

Romans 15:13 describes the blessings experienced by those who are truly walking by faith: "May the God of hope

fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” I can recall times when, humanly speaking, I had every reason to quit; and yet there was such a fullness of joy, peace, and hope in my heart that giving up was impossible. I couldn’t explain it—how do you explain a miracle?—but I did experience it and know that it was real. God keeps us going, not always by changing the circumstances, but by changing us and our outlook on those circumstances.

Reading a packet of letters that had reached the China Inland Mission center in Chinkiang, J. Hudson Taylor, founder of the mission, learned of serious rioting in two cities where CIM stations were located. The news was not good, and Taylor related this to his co-worker George Nicoll, who had brought him the mail. He told Nicoll that help must be sent immediately. Then Taylor began to whistle quietly his favorite hymn: “Jesus, I am resting, resting, in the joy of what Thou art. . . .”

“How *can* you whistle when our friends are in such danger?” Nicoll exclaimed.

“Would you have me be anxious and troubled?” asked Taylor. “That would not help them, and would certainly incapacitate me for my work. I have just to roll the burden on the Lord.” He did—and God worked![\[3\]](#)

Leaders must respond, not react, and they must respond as men and women of faith who know that they can cast their burdens on the Lord (1 Pet. 5:7). The most important meeting we as leaders attend is that daily personal meeting with the Lord, before the day begins, when worship and meditation increase our faith as we receive the orders for the day. Somewhere George Muller wrote that we must always come away from our daily “quiet time” *happy with the will of God*. If we don’t, nothing will seem right or go right, because the heart of every problem is the problem in the heart. “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Prov. 4:23).

Wherever he lived, Hudson Taylor put above the fireplace two plaques written in Hebrew: “Ebenezer” and “Jehovah-Jireh.” These words mean “Thus far the LORD has helped us” (1 Sam. 7:12) and “The LORD will provide” (Gen. 22:14). When you can look back with gratitude and look ahead with confidence, you don’t have to be afraid to look around at the problems. That’s the blessed result of living by faith. How do I know that I am living by faith? Here are four simple tests:

- Am I doing this for God’s glory? (Rom. 4:20)
- Am I rushing ahead or willing to wait? (Rom. 10:11; Isa. 28:16)
- Is what I am doing approved by the Word? (Rom. 10:17)
- Do I have joy and peace in my heart? (Rom. 15:13)

Passing these tests of faith assures us that we have a faith that can be tested—and trusted.



**A** friend of mine had this motto under the glass on his office desk: “Faith is living without scheming.” This brings us to the next word in our definition: *character*.

In the service of God, character is essential to success as God measures it. Character may not be essential for winning an election or even staying in office, and it certainly isn’t important for getting high ratings in the polls, but it is necessary for doing the kind of work that builds people and organizations that glorify the Lord. When he was president of Youth for Christ International, Bob Cook used to remind us, “There is no substitute for character. You can buy brains, but you can’t buy character.” With plenty of money and a clever agent, “nobodies” can be transformed into celebrities almost overnight, but the Lord takes the time required to build character into His leaders.

In grade school, I learned this ancient piece of wisdom:

Sow a thought, you reap an action.  
Sow an action, you reap a habit.  
Sow a habit, you reap a character.  
Sow a character, you reap a destiny.

Old stuff? It’s as old as eternity past and yet as fresh as this morning. It’s the kind of truth we need to emphasize in

this age when technology makes it so easy to fool most of the people all of the time. William R. Inge, dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, wrote in his *Outspoken Essays, 1922*, "We are always sowing our future; we are always reaping our past."[\[4\]](#) He might have added, "And we cannot escape the harvest."

A long history of repeated disobedience, climaxing with the inept leadership of King Saul, brought the nation of Israel into spiritual and political turmoil. Asaph the psalmist describes this sad cycle of blessing and judgment in Psalm 78 and then culminates his psalm by revealing God's answer to the problem: a leader with ability and integrity.

He chose David his servant  
and took him from the sheep pens;  
from tending the sheep he brought him  
to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,  
of Israel his inheritance.  
And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;  
with skillful hands he led them (vv. 70-72).

As a young man, David already had a national reputation, for the women sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7). However, that wasn't what attracted God to David. *David was a man after God's own heart* (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). "People look at the outward appearance," God told the prophet Samuel, "but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). David had "integrity of heart" (Ps. 78:72), and where there is integrity, you will find character. Four weeks before he was sworn in as the first president of the United States, George Washington wrote to a friend, "Integrity and firmness are all I can promise." He kept his promise.

David possessed a capable pair of hands. According to his song recorded in Psalm 18, he had clean hands (vv. 20, 24) and hands that were trained for war (v. 34). He lifted "holy hands" as he worshiped the Lord (Pss. 28:2; 63:4), and he had skillful hands as he led the nation (Ps. 78:72). People

could see David's hands as he expertly handled a harp, a bow, or a sword, but only God could see his heart; and the Lord saw integrity in his heart. David was not a man with a double mind or a divided heart. Yes, he had ability; but ability without integrity could lead to tragedy, as King Saul had demonstrated during his reign.

Alas, society today seems to emphasize ability and ignore character. People believe you can live a bad life and still be a good worker, that *doing* is more important than *being*. It's all done under the guise of "tolerance," because we're not supposed to believe in absolutes. When I was doing graduate work in American history, it pained me to see how some of the textbooks criticized and even debunked our American heroes. (Today the process is called "deconstruction.") Most people nowadays want celebrities, not heroes, because heroes challenge us and humble us—they don't always entertain us or defend our excuses for living an unethical life.

At this point, you may be saying, "How can you talk about integrity? David wasn't perfect." Of course not; we've already discussed the obvious fact that leaders are people and people are not perfect. But please remember that when David was wrong, he admitted it, wept over it, confessed his sins to God, and took his medicine like a man. That's called integrity. Today, leaders accused of breaking the law admit nothing, blame everybody else, and run for office again—and often win.

No amount of ability can compensate for a lack of integrity. At the same time, no degree of character is a substitute for the ability to do the job. People with character are honest with themselves and others and don't promise more than they can perform. It takes both ability and integrity to be the kind of leader God can bless and use. No matter how gifted we may be, if we don't maintain "clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:4), we cannot glorify the Lord. The steps downward are explained in 1 John 1:

If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth (v. 6).

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (v. 8).

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us (v. 10).

We start off by lying to others (v. 6), we continue by lying to ourselves (v. 8), and finally we end up lying to God and making Him out to be a liar (v. 10). The decline goes from hypocrisy to duplicity to apostasy. It's relatively easy to lie to others, until they get together and compare notes; and it isn't too difficult to lie to ourselves, although the practice leads to a terribly soiled conscience. By the time we start lying to God, hope is almost gone. Leaders must walk in the light and never hide in the shadows or disappear into the darkness. God warns us, "My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes" (Jer. 16:17).

People with clear consciences need never worry when the telephone rings, when they open their mail, or when the board chairman wants a private meeting. They have nothing to hide and therefore nothing to fear. Sir Walter Scott said it best: "O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

Whatever leaders may have, if they don't have character, they don't have anything.



**T**his is a good place to think about maturity, because one of the goals of Christian leadership is to help others reach their full potential for service. We want to be at our best and we want those working with us to be at their best so that we can do our best work together and, if it's God's will, go on to greater challenges. This doesn't mean that we "break" other people and "re-make" them in our own image, because we aren't God, and our image—even our *best* image—doesn't fit everybody. Instead, it means helping people to grow up and do their very best so they can move ahead in service.

Maturing people *know* themselves, *accept* themselves, and *are* themselves in every situation. They don't "play roles." They are realistic about themselves and have no illusions about who they are or what they can do. They aren't fooling themselves or trying to fool others, because maturity and humility go together. David wrote about this in Psalm 139. No matter how inept we may be in some things, each of us is still "fearfully and wonderfully made," and we should all praise God for what we are and what we can do (Ps. 139:14). When God made us, He made no mistakes.

When I was in grade school, it didn't take me long to discover that I was not an athlete. (My two older brothers were accomplished athletes.) When you are the last one



chosen for every team, and the team that ends up with you tries to give you to another team, you eventually get the message. I could run fast, so soccer was the only game I excelled in; but soccer wasn't an official school sport in those days. In Indiana, where I grew up, basketball and football reigned supreme. So what did I do? For protection, I managed to have either a star football player or star basketball player as a locker partner, and I managed to bungle my way on the field or in the gym, staying out of trouble. My teammates approved; after all, they did want to win the game.

But when it came to academics, writing for the school paper, making speeches for the student government, and even serving as a substitute when a teacher was absent, I was in my element. In those days schools awarded letters only for athletics, not academics, but I didn't mind. The entire experience helped me find myself and discover the work God wanted me to do.



What are some of the marks of people who are maturing?

To begin with, because they know themselves and accept themselves, they learn to accept others and cultivate a team approach to getting things done. It makes no difference who scores the points so long as the team wins. The key word is "cooperation" and not "competition." I think it was the British naval hero Lord Nelson who came on deck and found two of his officers engaged in a violent argument. He watched them a few moments and then stepped between them. Pointing to the ocean, he said, "Gentlemen, there is but one enemy, *and he is out there!*" Whether it's a coach giving a halftime pep talk or the president of a company explaining a new policy, the goal is the same: different people with different personalities working together to

achieve the same purposes with the least possible amount of friction.

Maturing people speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). It has well been said that truth without love is brutality and love without truth is hypocrisy. Brutality and hypocrisy are both sins, and sin destroys. Truth and love are tools to build with, and they are partners that work together. It would benefit us to read 1 Corinthians 13 frequently and ask ourselves, "Is this my portrait?" Love is named first in the list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) because love helps us produce and share the rest of the fruit that Paul names. Jesus called love a "new command" and said it is the major mark of each of His disciples (John 13:34-35).

Mature people know how to take responsibility willingly. When problems arise, they admit mistakes and ask questions instead of inventing excuses. They can be trusted to do their work well whether or not anybody is watching. I was once on a staff with a man whose evasive nonwork habits were obvious to everyone but himself. When asked to report on an assignment, he would invariably reply, "Oh, that's in my briefcase!" When asked where his briefcase was, he would say, "It's in the trunk of my car." Where was his car? His wife had it! He didn't stay on staff very long.

Mature people know that the way they do their work affects how others do their work.

Mature people do more than is required, not to earn points or get special recognition but because they consider themselves "slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from [their] heart" (Eph. 6:6). If they see a fellow worker having trouble, they offer to help. They don't compete with others; they compete with themselves and always strive to do their work better. Mature people have a healthy outlook on life and are dependable whether the Lord sends defeats or victories. If others have a gift of complaining, mature workers don't preach at them but rather try to have a positive attitude that may help to transform pessimism into

optimism. Like Paul and Silas in prison, mature workers can sing and pray—and bring down the house (Acts 16)!

As I've watched the men and women who have modeled leadership to me, I've observed that they not only have faith in God but also demonstrate faith in their co-workers. All of us on the team must believe in each other, or teamwork will be impossible. We must pray for one another and trust God to work in us, among us, and through us. "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon," Paul wrote to the church at Philippi (Phil. 2:19). However, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that Apollos was "quite unwilling" to visit them at that time but would come when he had opportunity (1 Cor. 16:12). This shows that Paul didn't "play God" in the lives of his associates, moving them around against their wills. Paul had his plans, but so did the Lord—and Paul was flexible.

When a new member joins the team, we soon calculate their "maturity quotient," and we might have to switch to Plan B to help them start growing. How do they respond to criticism and to praise? Are they patient with delays? Do they know which port they are headed for? Can they patiently listen without interrupting? Even seasoned servants occasionally become childish and require private therapy. "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses" (Prov. 27:6).

When I reflect on my own years of service, I give thanks for the men and women who patiently helped me mature and become a better team player. I'm still learning.



**L**et's look at a few biblical images of this elusive virtue we call "maturity." Perhaps this will help us better understand ourselves and our responsibilities to our fellow workers.

### **The Eagles (Deuteronomy 32:10-12)**

Here is how Moses pictured Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan:

In a desert land he found him [Israel], in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft. The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him (Deut. 32:10-12).

Christians, like eagles, were created for the heights. "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). "But our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Col. 3:1-2). This doesn't mean that (to quote D. L. Moody) "we are so heavenly minded we are no earthly good." It simply means

that we look at earthly things from the heavenly perspective and find out what God says about the situation.

The eagle's nest is high on the cliffs, and the parent birds bring food to the eaglets until the day comes when their young must leave the nest and be on their own. How do the parents encourage this? Sometimes by "stirring up the nest" so that the eaglets aren't comfortable anymore. They can't learn to fly by sitting in a nest and enjoying room service. The eaglets may fail in their first attempts at flight, but the adult birds are right there to rescue them, and the young birds finally succeed. At first the eaglets are disappointed at losing their cozy home, and then they are frightened at the hazards of flying and searching for food; but eventually the joys of flying and soaring replace the fear of falling, and they become more independent and finally leave for good.

Once we have learned how to do our job well, we don't usually welcome changes. We find security and delight in the familiar and we don't want anybody to stir up the nest. But normal healthy change is one of God's tools for maturing His people—and this might mean learning to use new equipment, working closely with new people, or discovering new approaches to old jobs. According to Hebrews 12:25-29, God sometimes shakes things "so that what cannot be shaken may remain" (v. 27). In organizations seeking to do God's work today, perhaps too much time, effort, and money goes into temporary scaffolding rather than into the permanent structure—and this kind of building cannot last. The Lord has to "shake up" His people occasionally so that they will mature in the faith and not put their trust in the temporary. One of the responsibilities of leaders is helping others get out of the nest and learn to fly, and we must be there to help them if they start to fall.

## **The Weaned Child (Psalm 131)**

This psalm is short, so I will quote it in its entirety:

My heart is not proud, LORD,  
my eyes are not haughty;  
I do not concern myself with great matters  
or things too wonderful for me.  
But I have calmed myself  
and quieted my ambitions.  
I am like a weaned child with its mother;  
like a weaned child I am content.  
Israel, put your hope in the LORD  
both now and forevermore.

Babies are cute and children are fun, but God's goal in their lives is that they mature and become useful adults. The basic purpose of family, church, school, and society is to protect and teach children so they can have the opportunities and motivation to learn what they need to know for successful adulthood. Knowing how to wash, dress, and feed themselves, how to care for their personal needs and the needs of others, and how to discern what's right and wrong and what's safe and dangerous are all part of this maturing process. From time to time, the child must give up something infantile in order to enjoy something more mature. This process is called weaning.

Like an eaglet in the nest, a child at the mother's breast is secure and satisfied; but for the child to remain that way would be a tragedy. Older children and mature adults deserve the joys and privileges of maturity—the freedom to make decisions, the opportunity to explore and learn, the blessings of friendship, the challenges of school and employment. Being totally dependent upon others would rob the maturing person of most of the joys of human life. The “separation process” begins at birth when the baby leaves the security of the womb. Before long the child must abandon nursing for solid food, and soon the child goes off to school and starts exploring the neighborhood and

making new friends. Then the young adult graduates from high school, moves out of the family home for a college dormitory, and eventually secures his or her own apartment. Maturity involves the painful process of being weaned from toys to tools, from prices to values, from instant gratification to patience, from giving orders to obeying them, from selfishness to love, and from pouting and fretting to saying, “Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

When I think of “weaning” in the life of faith, I think of the patriarch Abraham. First he had to give up his home in the idolatrous city of Ur. Then he had to say goodbye to his father and brother. His nephew Lot was in the way, so God removed him from the scene. God also removed Hagar and her son Ishmael. Then the Lord told Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac! God wanted Abraham to trust only in Him—His promises, His covenant, His power—rather than be double-minded and limp his way through life, trying to trust God while he was also trusting himself.

“And without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6) or serve Him. God weans us, as He did Abraham, so that we will develop a mature faith in Him alone—a faith that pleases Him and enables us to serve Him better.

### **The Runner (Jeremiah 12:1-6)**

The prophet Jeremiah began his ministry as a young man (Jer. 1:4-10) and was suddenly thrust into service at a very difficult time in Judah’s history. He faithfully declared God’s message to rulers and common people alike, but then he was confronted by a theological roadblock that almost silenced him. He realized that the wicked people in Jerusalem were prospering while the faithful in the godly remnant were suffering! Why was God blessing the wicked and not delivering the righteous (Jer. 12:1-4)? God’s reply was brief but vivid:

If you have raced with people on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan? (Jer. 12:5).

God made it clear that Jeremiah's ministry would not be easy; it would be like running a difficult race. He would begin by competing with foot soldiers, but they would soon be replaced by racehorses, and what man or woman can run faster than a racehorse? God was telling Jeremiah that his ministry would get harder, not easier. Running on the footpaths was one thing, but what would he do in "the jungle of the Jordan" where there were no easy paths and where he might confront ferocious beasts? That was the bad news. The good news was that, as he faced these new challenges, *he would draw upon God-given abilities he didn't know he had!* The challenges would mature him in his character and his skills. God doesn't pamper His leaders, but He does test them so He can better equip them (Heb. 13:20-21). The familiar adage is still true: "The will of God will never lead us where the grace of God cannot sustain us and enable us."

Leaders must not stand still or they will go backward. They must keep moving ahead so that others can move with them and claim new territory. We call this "maturing," and the key word is *perseverance*. "And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb. 12:1-2). The hiker on the footpath asked a farmer, "How far is it to the next town?" and the farmer replied, "Keep walking." The road will probably become more difficult, but if it's God's road, we have nothing to worry about. "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way" (Ps. 25:9).

It isn't unusual for God's leaders to experience difficulties and discouragements as they move along in their work; in fact, they have every right to expect opposition. Along with Jeremiah, biblical leaders such as Joseph, Moses, David, and



Paul all verify this fact, and so do the chapters in Christian biography and autobiography. The burdens and battles involved in leadership are what help us mature, accomplish more for the Lord, and bring glory to His name.

Keep walking! Keep running! Keep trusting!

### **The Gymnasium (Hebrews 12:4-13)**

In ancient Greece, fathers took their sons to the local gymnasium so they could be taught running, wrestling, boxing, swimming, and proper exercising. “A sound mind in a sound body” was the goal of Greek education, and the boys had to start young, usually about age six. The Greeks and Romans were as enthusiastic about sports as people are today. This passage in Hebrews is one of the most important for understanding the value of training and perseverance, for it explains that the difficulties God permits can help His sons and daughters develop discipline, and discipline helps us keep going when the going is hard. “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (v. 11). The Greek word translated “trained” gives us the English word “gymnasium.”

Please note that the Father disciplines *His own children*, which explains why unbelievers often seem to have an easier time of it in this life. Note also that this discipline is applied in love, for the good of the believer. If God allows us to be “plowed up” by people and circumstances, it’s only because He has a harvest in view. *The kind of harvest we reap depends on the seeds we plant!* If we plant faith, gratitude, and praise to God, the harvest will be beautiful and glorify the Lord; but if we plant unbelief, complaining, and disobedience, we will reap a bitter harvest of sorrow. It takes time for the harvest to appear, so we need “faith and patience” as we claim God’s promises (Heb. 6:12).

Every believer experiences discipline in God's gymnasium, but leaders are often given graduate courses that are very demanding. Leaders take a lot more blame, receive much less credit, and carry much heavier burdens than their associates do. I think it was President Harry Truman who said, "To be a leader is to be lonely. It's very lonely at the top." One night in 1945, General Dwight Eisenhower was walking along the Rhine River, thinking about the crossing his men would make the next day. He met a soldier also out for a walk and asked him why he wasn't sleeping. The young man didn't recognize his commander and said, "I guess I'm a little nervous." "Well, so am I," said Eisenhower. "Let's walk together and perhaps we'll draw strength from each other."

That's why leaders suffer and sacrifice—so they can understand how the buck privates feel and, along with them, face the future with confidence. "Leaders don't inflict pain," says a business expert, "they bear pain." *And when the pain or the anticipation of pain is at its worst, something great is about to happen!* Our Father never wastes suffering; nor should we, for the plowing precedes the sowing and the sowing will bring the harvest.



**N**ow let's think about ability.

In the familiar Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30)—the TNIV calls it “The Parable of the Bags of Gold”—Jesus points out that the master apportioned the money according to each servant's own ability (v. 15). Ability is the power to turn opportunities into accomplishments and gain something good from the transaction. The servant with much ability was given five bags of gold, the servant with average ability two bags, and the servant with minimum ability one bag. This seems wise and fair, for the issue wasn't the portion they began with but the *proportion* they ended with. The first two servants doubled their wealth, from five bags to ten and from two bags to four, but the third servant wasted the opportunity by hiding his gold—with the end result that he lost the one bag he had (v. 28).

The first two servants received identical commendations (vv. 21, 23), but the third man was called wicked and lazy and was disciplined (vv. 26–30). Had he gained only one bag more, he would have qualified for the same promotion the other men received, because promotion depended on proportion.

Each ability we have is a gift from the God who determined and supervised the “weaving together” of our

person before we were born (Ps. 139:13–16). In His wisdom, the Lord never gave me mechanical dexterity or athletic ability, although my two older brothers had plenty of both. My only talent was with words—reading them, speaking them, and putting them together on paper. From seventh grade to graduation, I was in the student government (making speeches) and on the staff of the school paper (writing and editing articles). Our campus had a beautiful new print shop that I worked in until graduation, learning how words were printed on paper. I was in my element and I knew it.

When the Lord saved me, He gave me the spiritual gift of teaching His Word, and it perfectly matched up with my ability to use words. Preaching and teaching led to writing, and I have invested my life studying the Bible and sharing its truths with people around the world, both in person and in my books. It's been a wonderful life; I'm grateful to the Lord for His goodness.

Leaders must discover their abilities and gifts as soon as possible and use them in the power of the Spirit for the glory of the Lord. The only people more miserable than those who try to parade abilities they don't have are those who have abilities and don't use them at all. Nobody is happier than the people who know themselves, accept themselves and their abilities, and give themselves to the Lord to serve Him as He sees fit. On more than one occasion I've been that familiar "square peg in a round hole" and couldn't wait to be set free. Finally I learned how to say no, and since then have rarely been found serving where I don't belong.

If the "one bag of gold" servant had simply accepted the way God made him, given thanks for it, and gone to work to multiply the money, he, too, would have become a ruler. Note the sequence of events in the lives of the other two servants. They started by being servants but ended up being made rulers. They were faithful with a few things and

ended up with many things. They began with toil and ended up sharing the master's joy. Their faithfulness paid off!

"Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). Not only must we do what the Master tells us to do, but we must also do it the way He wants us to do it. He wants us to use the ability or abilities He has given us and to be grateful for the privilege.

I was meditating on these matters one day when it struck me that the boy we call the "prodigal son" (Luke 15:11-25) took the opposite approach to life and failed miserably. Having collected his inheritance, he went to the far country as an important man, and he ended up a servant, feeding the pigs. He started out with many things and ended up with nothing but the clothes on his body. He began his venture with great joy, because he was now free from living under his father's authority and his big brother's watchful eye; but he ended up in great sorrow and toil as he waited for somebody to give him something to eat.

Think for a moment of the people in the Bible who followed the formula in Matthew 25:21 and became eminently successful. Joseph served his father, his master in Egypt, and the chief of the prison as well as the other inmates in the prison, and God promoted him from a servant to a ruler. He began with almost nothing and ended up with great riches, and his sorrow was transformed into joy, especially when he was reconciled with his father and brothers. The formula worked.

Moses also started as a servant—a shepherd in Midian—but eventually he became the leader of the nation of Israel. Joshua began as Moses's servant and at Moses's death took over the leadership of the nation. David began his career shepherding his father's flock and ended up shepherding the people of Israel. When our Lord Jesus Christ came to earth, He came as a poor servant with no place to lay His head, and was treated like a criminal; but today He reigns in glory, because God highly exalted Him (Phil. 2:1-11).



True leaders don't push themselves forward; they serve God faithfully and let Him prepare them for what He has planned for them. Leaders don't pry the doors open; they pray them open as they patiently wait for God's time. I've been privileged to speak at several denominational pastors' conferences, and it's been painful to see how many men mingle with the "management" and subtly campaign for a "bigger church." They seem to have forgotten 1 Peter 5:5-6.

To be equipped and trained by God, and then placed by Him into the places that perfectly match our gifts and abilities, is one of the greatest privileges and joys of the Christian life. "The joy of the Lord" includes the joy that the Lord Himself experienced as He served the Father here on earth. It's the joy of submitting to His will and being empowered by His Spirit. "At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure'" (Luke 10:21).

We must be diligent to strengthen and perfect our gifts and abilities, because there is always more to learn and more to do. "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you," Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14), and in his second letter he admonished him, "I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you" (2 Tim. 1:6). In our Lord's parable, the servant with one bag of gold sinned by doing nothing. He buried his opportunity and protected it, but he didn't invest it. Instead of saying, "My master trusts me and I don't want to fail him," he became frightened and shifted into neutral. He didn't have too high an opinion of his master (Matt. 25:24-25), and this led to a low view of his

opportunity. The leader's relationship to the Lord is the key to success.

When I was serving with Back to the Bible Broadcast, founding director Theodore Epp invited J. Oswald Sanders to speak in chapel for a few days, and what a delight it was to meet him and hear him. At that time he was general director of the China Inland Mission. I had read his books and been greatly helped by them. As he and I were being taken to a staff member's home for dinner one evening, Dr. Sanders asked me, "What have you been doing lately?" I proceeded to review my schedule for him—past, present, and future—which included traveling, speaking, and writing, and he listened patiently. Then he quietly said, "But we serve a wonderful Master, don't we?" and that settled the matter. Those few words lovingly rebuked me and set me on the right track.

From that time I began to see ministry not as a list of difficult tasks to be completed, but as opportunities to enjoy my Master's fellowship and to please His heart as we worked together. The apostle John said it best: "And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Why? Because His commands are expressions of His love. When obedience is motivated by love, work isn't a burden that drags us down but a tide that lifts us up. Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15–19), not because Jesus didn't know but because Peter needed to know. "Though you have not seen him, you love him," Peter wrote to believers years later (1 Pet. 1:8).

Whatever abilities we have were given to us by the Lord, and they were given not to be admired or buried but to be invested, "not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7).



**N**o one should exercise authority who is not under authority. That kind of “leadership” is irresponsible. No matter how many people are over us or under us, we must keep in mind that God is our supreme authority and that we are ultimately accountable to Him.

According to Romans 13:1-5, God is the originator of authority on this earth. He is not responsible for every incompetent leader in office, but He did establish a system of authority within society, and this system is essential for the effective operation of human life on this earth. Ultimately, somebody must take charge, make decisions, and be accountable for what is done. The leadership “trinity” involves authority, responsibility, and accountability. That’s the way God made it. Though we may not like some of the individuals who are in office, we must respect the office itself and the authority behind it. Paul commands us to “be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom. 13:1), except when they demand that we disobey God. Then we reply with the apostles, “We must obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29).

The prophet Isaiah described the social and political turmoil of his day, which was caused by a lack of godly leadership. “Our offenses are ever with us, and we



acknowledge our iniquities: rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God, inciting revolt and oppression, uttering lies our hearts have conceived. So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter" (Isa. 59:12-14). It's a picture of the social and political "traffic jam" that results when leaders ignore God's authority and function only to please themselves.

When Jesus was ministering on earth, the Romans were in charge, and Jesus taught the people, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matt. 22:15-22). However, our Lord's views of authority differed radically from those of Caesar and Pilate. Consider Luke 22:24-27:

A dispute also arose among them [the disciples] as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

The disciples weren't the only "status seekers" who debated over how important they thought they were. The question "Who is the greatest?" is still in vogue and is used to measure people today. But if Jesus is our example in service, the proper question ought to be "Who serves the most people at the greatest sacrifice?" and not "Who is the greatest?" According to our Lord, the first type of person is the greatest in the eyes of God. Not the sword and scepter but the towel and basin *and the cross* symbolize Christian service. Executives ask one another, "How many people work for you?" but Jesus asks, "For how many people are you working?" We enjoy the many rights the law grants us, but Jesus encourages us to serve like the youngest person on the staff, who may have no rights.

The key word here is *humility*, a concept that the ancient Greeks and Romans disdained. To them humility meant weakness, not courage. When Paul wrote Philippians 2:1-11, he gave us some insight into our Lord's humility when He came to earth. The word "humility" brings to my mind two quotations. The first defines humility as "not thinking poorly of yourself, but just not thinking of yourself at all." The second is another definition: "Humility is that grace that, when you know you have it, you have lost it." When proud people are given authority, they swell and start giving orders. When humble people are given authority, they grow, submit even more, and start taking orders.

The connection between sacrificial service and leadership is an important one. Authority is handed to us with the work we are given to do, but we must have stature as well as authority if we want to succeed. Either we earn stature on the new assignment or we bring stature with us from the old one. We must pay a price to earn stature, but without it we will not trigger in others the obedience, respect, and love that are necessary for effective leadership.

When he accepted the position of commander in chief of the American revolutionary army, George Washington didn't have a spectacular military record, but he did have character. His men knew what he was sacrificing to become their leader, and they idolized him. Noted historian Gordon S. Wood wrote, "Washington's genius, Washington's greatness, lay in his character. . . . It was his moral character that set him off from other men."[\[5\]](#) The soldiers were loyal to their cause, but that cause was personified in their commander. By the way, Washington accepted no salary for his services during the Revolutionary War.

Let's review our definition thus far: "Christian leaders are people who, by faith, willingly use their character, ability, authority, and opportunities. . . ." Abilities are gifts from God, treasures we can protect and perfect. Authority is also God's gift, and we accept it knowing that it involves

responsibility and accountability. Character is what God helps us build over the years as we obey His will and yield to His Spirit. But stature grows as we give ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord and to others. Paul wrote of Timothy, “I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 2:20–21). Christ comes first in our lives (Phil. 1:21), and then others.

Authority is given to us by those above us; stature is earned from those around us, and the price we pay is sacrificial service. Jesus said, “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). Note the phrase “among you.” He was *over* them as their Lord, but He was also *among* them as their servant. Peter remembered this and wrote years later, “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder. . . . Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care” (1 Pet. 5:1–2). Leaders are over their people but also among them; they are brothers and sisters as well as leaders, and sometimes it’s difficult to keep the balance. Diotrophes got unbalanced, opposed the Lord, and divided the church (3 John 9–10). Unfortunately, “church bosses” are still with us today.

The leader who directs only by executive fiat—the experts call this “micromanaging”—is insulting his associates and wasting opportunities to show creative leadership. You don’t use a cannon to kill a mosquito. Leaders who insist on being involved in every decision at every organizational level have little confidence in their associates and too much confidence in themselves. At the same time, leaders who “pass the buck” to their subordinates and refuse to tackle the big issues themselves don’t deserve to have their name on the office door, or, for that matter, deserve the office or the door.

Remember that phrase “by faith” in our definition? This means not only faith that the Lord will work *through* the organization but also faith that He will work *within* the

organization and help people do their jobs well. We need to pray for our collaborators and ask God to equip them, mature them, and bless them. People who can't be trusted and who will not improve must be removed from the team and helped to find a place of service suited to them, if there is one.



**T**he next word in our definition is *opportunities*. Leaders are people who have a gift for attracting and recognizing opportunities and using them to challenge and build the workers and therefore build the work. The verb “seize” is often used before the word “opportunity” because, like life itself, an opportunity “appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14). An Eastern proverb says that opportunity has only a forelock and therefore must be seized as it approaches or it cannot be seized at all. Neglected or missed opportunities rarely return. The Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, “For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been.’” Second in line would be, “If only.”

Our English word “opportunity” comes from two Latin words that together mean “toward the harbor.” The image is obvious: the pilot of the ship has a port in mind and, no matter what the circumstances (Latin again: “that which stands around [us]”), he uses those circumstances to help him reach his goal. A Roman proverb says, “When the pilot does not know what port he’s heading for, no wind is the right wind.” We can easily turn circumstances into excuses, and excuses can lead to delays and detours. “Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap” (Eccles. 11:4; see also Prov. 22:13; 26:13).

Evangelist Billy Sunday defined an excuse as “the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie,” which explains why people who are good at making excuses are seldom good at making anything else.

I once heard an officer in a Christian ministry say he was “lucky” to have the position he held. But Christians aren’t gamblers; we don’t believe in luck. Our faith is in the sovereignty of God, a God who orders events according to His wise purposes. Theologians call this “the providence of God” (more Latin: *pro* = before, beforehand; *video* = to see). God is not the victim of the careless decisions people make, because when He is not allowed to rule, He overrules; the disobedient are the losers. Someone asked an eminent theologian, “Do you really believe that what’s going to be is going to be?” He replied, “Would you have me believe that what’s going to be *isn’t* going to be?” He could have quoted Psalm 115:3: “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.”

Opportunities energize the faithful and paralyze the fearful. When opportunity knocks, it doesn’t immediately arouse everybody. Only the leaders (and potential leaders) who are already awake and listening hear the knock and open the door to the future. Of all the skillful men David had in his army at Hebron, perhaps the most valuable were those who “understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (1 Chron. 12:32). Not everybody has this gift, but all of us must be alert enough to identify those who are so gifted, listen to their counsel, and weigh it carefully.

If we are not alert to opportunities, we soon find ourselves cultivating conformity, losing touch with reality, and sauntering down that comfortable road that leads to misery. If no new problems and challenges develop in our work, if no exciting new plans emerge from staff meetings, if the gifted people on the staff start drifting off to serve in other organizations, then we are probably on that dangerous road already. If we find ourselves glorifying “the good old

days” and unwilling to consider new ideas and make changes that would enhance our work, then the knock at the door is not opportunity. It’s probably the corporate pallbearers.

This doesn’t mean that we should ignore the past and, like the ancient Athenians, use our time for discussing every new idea that floats by (Acts 17:21), because leaders must resist popular novelties as much as they resist decayed antiquities. The official Youth for Christ motto says it well: “Geared to the times, anchored to the Rock.” Some things in our work should never be changed, because they give us identity and continuity; but other things must occasionally be altered if we want to stay up-to-date. The person today who goes from door to door selling horseshoes or quill pens will probably find few buyers.

Effective leaders must repeatedly *look up* to the Lord for guidance, testing everything by His Word. “But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21 NASB). They must also *look back* and determine how the new fits into the old. “He who does not know the past is condemned to repeat it,” said philosopher George Santayana. If we are sentimental about the past instead of sensible, our perspective will be wrong as we *look ahead* and plan for the future.

God has ordained that in His creation the new shall come from the old and may eventually replace the old, and it’s folly to fight against that plan. “Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account” (Eccles. 3:15). The NIV margin reads “and God calls back the past.” A bit of doggerel I learned in a seminary class has helped me:

Methods are many, principles are few;  
Methods always change, principles never do.

We must never adopt a new method until we understand the principles behind it and decide that these principles are

biblical and practical. The old and the new aren't enemies; they are partners.

As believers, we must remember that the enemy will set traps for us and call them opportunities. "You will not certainly die," Satan said to Eve. "For God knows that when you eat of it [the forbidden tree] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Gen. 3:4-5). On at least two occasions Joshua walked into traps because he didn't take time to ask the Lord for guidance (Josh. 7; 9), and David disobeyed God's law when he brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem on a new cart (2 Sam. 6). The fact that everybody applauded what the king was doing didn't make his actions right.

Opportunities often look like impossibilities, but the Lord specializes in doing the impossible. "What is impossible with human beings is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). In fact, it's when God does the impossible that He receives the most glory. The pages of Scripture, church history, and Christian biography and autobiography bear witness to this. The key phrase is "by faith"—not "by finances" or "by force" or "by finesse." When Jesus wanted to feed over five thousand people, He started with what He had—a little boy's lunch—and looked up to the Father for His blessing. His disciples thought that money was the solution to the problem (John 6:7) and learned their lesson as they distributed the bread and fish.

"Keep your ministry on a miracle basis," Dr. Bob Cook used to tell us. "If you can explain what's going on, God didn't do it." I can bear witness that this counsel is valid.



Faithful leaders follow the example of Jesus and put others ahead of themselves. “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all,” Jesus told His disciples (Mark 9:35). When leaders make decisions, they think not only of the glory of God but also of the good of their associates. They ask, “What can I do to help them develop into leaders themselves? Are there opportunities I can point to that will challenge them more?”

Many years ago, I wrote an editorial for *Confident Living* magazine entitled “Wanted: Hinge People.”[\[6\]](#) What are “hinge people”? They are men and women whom God uses to open doors of opportunity for others. After all, large doors can turn on small hinges. Jesus holds the keys (Rev. 3:7-8), but He still wants to use His leaders to point the way for others.

Most Christians know that God used John Knox to lead the Reformation in Scotland, but they may not know that it was his friend John Rough who challenged him to start serving the Lord by preaching the Word. A Christian named George Gould attended a Sunday-school conference in Cambridge, England, and was impressed by the message given by a local young minister. Gould mentioned the minister’s name to Thomas Olney, a deacon in a London church that was

seeking a pastor. The result was that Charles Haddon Spurgeon was called to serve in London, and had a phenomenal ministry.

I could give many other examples, but the point is clear: John Rough, George Gould, and Thomas Olney were all “hinge people” who were used to help open doors for others to enter into the ministries God had prepared for them. I can think of many hinge people in my own life. There was the grade school teacher who challenged me to do a lot of reading and writing. I recall the deacon who asked me to give my testimony at a street meeting, and the friend who wanted me to be his roommate at seminary. The Youth for Christ director who challenged me to become a part of the international YFC staff and teach the Bible to teens is still one of my best friends. While I was on staff with YFC, our president Ted Engstrom introduced me to several Christian writers, editors, and publishers, and Ted even asked me to coauthor some books! Ted was sensitive to and appreciative of what his staff accomplished and could accomplish, and he let us know it.

Of course, there’s a risk involved here, because as we open doors for others in our own sphere of service, the Lord may eventually call them into other spheres of service. More than one Youth for Christ International president left to become a university president, and many rally directors were called to pastor strategic churches. I’ve lost count of the YFC alumni who became authors, media preachers, and directors of missionary ministries. I served in YFC four years and then returned to the pastorate, gradually moved into an itinerant Bible teaching ministry, and then served on the staff of Back to the Bible Broadcast for ten years. Where would I have been without the Lord’s “hinge people”?

J. Hudson Taylor used to pray that God would give him “wide usefulness,” and the Lord answered that prayer. Taylor promoted other mission agencies as well as his own

China Inland Mission and even raised money and recruited workers for them. I trust that during my many years of ministry the Lord has used me to point others toward open doors and encourage them to walk through by faith.

But as I mentioned earlier, it isn't easy to say goodbye to people you have helped to equip for their ministry. "While they [the believers at Antioch] were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2). Barnabas and Saul were two of the leading men in the church, and they would be greatly missed. It was Barnabas who had gone to Tarsus and recruited Saul to minister with him at Antioch (Acts 11:22-26), and now the Lord was recruiting both of them for wider work. We can't play God in people's lives and tell them what the Lord wants them to do, but we can be available if the Lord wants us to help open a door for them.

Jesus certainly opened doors for His disciples. The four fishermen would have never gotten themselves into secular or sacred history, but Jesus made it happen. I marvel at our Lord's long-suffering with His men, especially Peter. Jesus allowed Peter to enter into many different kinds of situations so he could learn more about himself and what God could do through him. Jesus used Peter's boat and nets to teach him some valuable faith lessons, and every failure that Peter experienced taught him something new about himself and his Master. What life does to us not only depends on what life finds in us, but also determines what God does for us. The Lord transformed Simon from sand into rock, and He can do the same for us. And, with the Lord's help, we can do the same for others.

I understand that the industrial giant Andrew Carnegie had inscribed on his tombstone, "Here lies a man who knew how to enlist in his service better men than himself." Couple that with this statement from former British prime minister Harold Macmillan: "Be like an oak tree—your branches

spreading out widely so that new saplings may grow in their shade.” In short, be a “hinge person.” Help others reach their fullest potential, or at least encourage them to move steadily in that direction. There is no better way to serve the generations yet to come, and it’s one of the best ways to bring glory to the Lord.

Leadership isn’t just a job or even a profession. Leadership is the overflow of a life dedicated to God and devoted to serving others, always seeking to achieve worthy goals. It’s a God-given opportunity to be a builder of lives and organizations that can make a difference in lives and therefore make a difference in this world. The influential columnist Walter Lippmann said that the final test of leaders is that they leave behind them in other people “the conviction and the will to carry on.” Even everyday aspects of leadership—such as the practical choices we make about how to use time and money—can be seen as ways to help others develop into their full potential, since these choices model for others our view of eternity and the values that control our lives.

Former secretary-general of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in his book *Markings*: “Your position never gives you the right to command. It only imposes on you the duty of so living your life that others can receive your orders without being humiliated.”[\[7\]](#)

Ponder that statement.



**H**ere and there in the Bible I have found images that have helped me better understand what we call “leadership.” We must be careful not to turn these parables and metaphors into allegories and thereby miss the main message of each image—these images would not be in the Bible if they didn’t have valuable messages for us. We will consider a few of them.

### **Joseph, the Branches That Go over the Wall (Genesis 49:22-26)**

The Lord took thirty years to equip Joseph and providentially direct him to Egypt, where he became second in command of the most powerful kingdom of that day. Here was a Jewish young man, married to a Gentile and ruling over Gentiles, for what purpose? For the purpose of preserving the people of Israel so they could bring God’s blessings to the whole world. Sixty-six people in Jacob’s family went to Egypt and joined Joseph and his family, making a total of seventy Jews in the land. But four centuries later, nearly two million Jews were delivered from slavery and departed from Egypt for the Promised Land.

On his deathbed, the elderly Jacob said the following about Joseph. Read the text carefully and try to see the

pictures.

Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb. Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers (Gen. 49:22-26).

Jacob's home was like a battlefield, with ten of his sons (we exclude Joseph's full brother, Benjamin) shooting arrows at Joseph. Shooting arrows is an image of speaking harsh words and telling lies (Pss. 57:4; 64:3-4; Prov. 26:18-19). Joseph told the truth about his brothers, so they retaliated by speaking meanly to him and about him. It was Joseph's assignment to go to Egypt ahead of the family; there he would protect them and provide for them. This would give Israel opportunity to become a great nation (Ps. 105:17; Gen. 12:2). Like a vine, Joseph went "over the wall" that separated Jews and Gentiles. He was taken to Egypt where he labored, suffered, and was eventually exalted. Because of his royal authority, he could deal with his brothers when they came to Egypt for food, and eventually God brought them to the place of repentance.

When Jacob spoke of Joseph, he used the words "bless" or "blessing" six times. These blessings would come from the Mighty One, the Shepherd, the Rock, the God of his father, the Almighty. The God of Jacob is a great God! There would be blessings from above the earth (sunshine, rain), blessings from under the earth (water, minerals), and blessings on the earth (the offspring of humans and animals). God separated Joseph from his brothers (v. 26 margin) that they might eventually be reconciled and become a great nation. If any character in the Bible

illustrates the sovereign providence of God and the blessings of godly leadership, it is Joseph.

What does Joseph teach us about leadership? One obvious truth is that the road to leadership is not easy and that God may have to put us through battles, misunderstandings, and even physical suffering before He can put a crown on our head (Ps. 105:17–22). Preparation for leadership requires us first to be under authority, then to learn to wait for God to work, and finally to give Him all the glory. Sometimes our greatest battles will be fought on home territory.

Becoming a leader may require us to “go over the wall” and be separated from or criticized by people we dearly love. Like Joseph, more than one servant of the Lord has been called to leave the traditional path in order to accomplish God’s will. I recall when I had to go over the wall and enter a wider field of ministry and fellowship in order to obey the Lord, and a pastor friend said to me, “I’m sorry to see you are leaving the ministry.” But I didn’t “leave the ministry.” Instead, I entered into a wider and more challenging ministry that helped to prepare me for even more challenging opportunities.

Each difficult experience helps us to know God better—the Mighty One who gives us strength, the Shepherd who guides us, the Rock who protects us, the God of our fathers who keeps His covenant promises, the Almighty who is sufficient to meet every need. We look at the task before us and ask, “And who is equal to such a task?” (2 Cor. 2:16). The answer? “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:5–6).

“But we must not forget that his strength is made perfect in our weakness,” wrote Bible teacher Nathan Stone. “His sufficiency is most manifest in our insufficiency; his fullness in our emptiness, that being filled, from us may flow rivers of living water to a thirsty and needy humanity.”[\[8\]](#)

We don't manufacture blessings; God grants them to us graciously. We don't retaliate when others oppose us, even those nearest to us. Instead we leave the matter to God. We believe Romans 8:28 and trust that God in His time will work everything out for our good and His glory. "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

History reveals that when Christian ministries start to become carbon copies of each other, God calls people He's been preparing for years to "jump over the wall" and bring new blessings to the church. I think of J. Hudson Taylor in China and Amy Carmichael in India, D. L. Moody and Billy Graham in evangelism, J. Irvin Overholtzer in child evangelism, Percy Crawford in youth evangelism, and Sam Hadley and Mel Trotter in rescue mission ministry. These people dared to jump over the wall and were attacked by some of God's people for doing it, but God used them to accomplish great things for His glory. When young Charles Spurgeon began preaching in a popular style that spoke to the common people, many people tried to change him, but he jumped over the wall and God used him to reach the masses. He is still reaching them.

God seems to enjoy using "mavericks" who aren't afraid to be different.

### **Moses and Aaron and the Budding Rod (Numbers 16-17)**

Successful leaders must expect opposition from "control freaks" who want to run everything. If ever your leadership has undeservedly been attacked by a board member or two, or perhaps by a few employees or church members, imagine Moses and Aaron facing 250 "well-known community leaders" (Num. 16:1-3). That's a lot of opposition! Had they called for a vote, Moses and Aaron would have been thrown out, but as Reformation leader



John Knox said, "A man with God is always in the majority." The Lord said, "I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites," and He did (Num. 17:1-5).

Moses didn't use his own powerful staff to deal with the rebels (see Exod. 4; 7; 8; 14) but the staffs of the leaders themselves. The test was a very simple one: Moses put the staffs, along with Aaron's staff, into the tabernacle before the Lord, knowing that God would identify His leader. When the test was over, Aaron's rod was different from the others because it produced life, beauty, and fruit, the very blessings we expect from leaders whom God has chosen. First and foremost, Moses and Aaron were servants of God, not self-appointed employees of the nation. The other leaders had authority in their respective spheres, but not over the entire nation of Israel. The ark of the covenant was the throne of God in the camp, and Jehovah was the final authority. God operates by executive fiat, not by consensus, and it's dangerous to question His will or defy His commands. We never negotiate the will of God; we hear it and we obey it.

Many leaders today carry ID cards and business cards, but few carry beautiful, fruitful staffs that radiate life. We don't expect God to do such miracles to authenticate our credentials, but we do want God to anoint and bless His leaders. A. W. Tozer said, "Before we follow any man, we should look for the oil on his forehead." In the Old Testament days, God's prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil, symbolizing the presence and power of the Holy Spirit; and God's chosen leaders today must have that same spiritual power. Jesus commanded His disciples to "stay in the city until [they had] been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). For nearly three years they had been learning God's truth, preaching, and even doing miracles, but apart from the Spirit's power they could not successfully serve the Lord. They waited, and the Spirit

came and equipped and empowered them. Their staffs had life, beauty, and fruit.

All the tribal leaders in the nation of Israel had staffs, but only one staff had life, and that was Aaron's. Leadership has to do with life and not just meetings, plans, and reports. All the staffs placed in the tabernacle were close to the mercy seat, but only Aaron's rod revealed life, beauty, and fruit. The Lord wasn't discounting the ministry of the other leaders; He was only reminding them not to go beyond their own calling but to be faithful to do their own work. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you" (Rom. 12:3). "When I became a man," wrote the apostle Paul, "I put the ways of childhood behind me" (1 Cor. 13:11). Every leader must take that step. When God wants to provide new leaders, He sometimes matures them in the furnace of affliction. Children usually like to act important and enjoy being the center of attention. Their key word is not "ours" but "mine!" But maturing people talk less and listen more, ask for less and give more, and do it all to the glory of God.

The fruitfulness of Aaron's rod reminds us of our Lord's words in John 15:4: "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." Where there is life there is growth, and where there is growth there will be fruit. Not only are leaders fruitful themselves, but their leadership style also encourages others to bear fruit. With the Lord's help, they create a "maturing atmosphere" in the fellowship, an atmosphere that brings out the best in others and produces lasting fruit that honors the Lord.

**King David, the Brightness after Rain (2 Samuel 23:1-7)**

When we think of David, we usually think of a shepherd, which, in Scripture, is the image of either a spiritual leader (1 Pet. 5:1-4) or a civil leader (see Ezek. 34). Our word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd.” You can drive cattle, but you must lead sheep. When David disobeyed the Lord and took a census, God chastened the nation by slaying seventy thousand people. David pled with God, “I have sinned; I, the shepherd, have done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done?” (2 Sam. 24:17). David saw his people as a flock, and he was touched deeply by their pains and sorrows. The Lord chose David “to be the shepherd of his people” (Ps. 78:71), and David proved to be a faithful shepherd, like the Son of David who said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). I’ll say more about this later.

David’s last words, recorded in 2 Samuel 23:1-7, mention nothing about shepherding, though in verse 4 he does mention pastures (“rain that brings grass from the earth”). But when you recall that David became king after the reign of Saul, the images in this passage come to life. No matter how incompetent or even how wicked a previous leader may have been, the new leader must signal the dawning of a new day. David’s “last words on leadership” describe God’s chosen leader arriving on the scene like sunshine after rain. He brought to the land not a destructive storm (see Isa. 25:4) but a life-giving rainfall that nourished the vegetation.

Where there is no irrigation in the Holy Land, the ground is barren until the first rains arrive; and then almost overnight the land teems with life and beauty. Godly leaders are like that.

David’s song reminds us that leaders are to be like sunshine and rain, both of which are necessary if the earth is to be fruitful. “May he endure as long as the sun,” Solomon wrote. “May he be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth” (Ps. 72:5-6). Solomon also

wrote, “A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops” (Prov. 28:3), and he may have had the reign of King Saul in mind. He also wrote, “Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a helpless people” (Prov. 28:15). We recall that David killed a lion and a bear to protect his father’s flock (1 Sam. 17:34–37), and when he became king, he replaced a man whose oppressive reign was like the attacks of lions and bears.

In ancient times in the Near East, rulers were often tyrannical and despotic. Read the book of Esther and see how Xerxes ran his kingdom. Rulers were noted for their pride (Dan. 4:28–37; Acts 12:19–24) and anger (Dan. 3), as well as their unwillingness to listen to what anybody else had to say—especially Jehovah God. Like Pharaoh, they asked, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?” (Exod. 5:2). King Saul started out as a fairly good leader, but the farther he strayed from the Lord and the more he hated David, the worse he became; and it wasn’t easy to live under his rule. Indeed, David’s leadership did usher in a new day, a calm after the storm.

If you find yourself the successor to an egotistical dictator like Saul, pay attention to David’s “swan song.” It will help you restore peace, harmony, and confidence. The truly God-fearing leader brings fruitful rain and not frightful storms, and soon there is a beautiful sunrise announcing that a new day has dawned. David knew that he was “over the people” but also under the authority of God (2 Sam. 23:3), a topic we have already discussed. David served God the Father (“the God of Jacob,” v. 1); he was anointed by God the Spirit (v. 2); and he exalted God the Son, the Rock (v. 3). David knew the history of his people and was therefore equipped to deal with problems and make wise plans for the future. He had to deal with evil men, even in his own family (v. 6), but he was confident that God would fulfill His covenant promises and bring the Messiah into the world through his family (v. 5; Luke 1:26–38). David might fail and his family

might fail, but God's covenant promises would never fail (2 Sam. 7:1-17).



**L**et's consider a few more images of successful leadership.

### **David and a Cup of Cold Water (2 Samuel 23:13-17)**

This event took place either during the years when David was fleeing from Saul or just after he had become king in Hebron and the Philistines had attacked and taken over Bethlehem (2 Sam. 5:17; 1 Chron. 14:8). It was during the hot harvest season, and David—perhaps nostalgically—longed for a drink of the cool water from the well at his childhood home. He didn't issue an order; he merely said to himself, "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem" (v. 15). Three of his mighty warriors overheard his words and risked their lives to get him the water. But David didn't drink the water. Instead he poured it out as a drink offering before the Lord and said, "Is it not the blood of men who went at the risk of their lives?" (v. 17).

This event reveals a great deal about David as a leader. For one thing, his men loved him and wanted to please him, even at the risk of their own lives. They were also close enough to him to hear his whispered words. Is that our relationship to Jesus? "So we make it our goal to please

him,” wrote Paul (2 Cor. 5:9), and John wrote, “We keep his commands and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:22). It’s one thing to obey the commander when he issues an order, but when all he does is breathe out a desire and we obey him, it shows that our relationship goes much deeper.

David didn’t drink the water. Had he done so, he would have cheapened the heroic deed performed by those three mighty men. To David, the water symbolized their blood, so he poured it out before God as a drink offering. I wonder if Paul had this gracious act in mind when he wrote, “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you” (Phil. 2:17; see also 2 Tim. 4:6).

Leaders are people who love and appreciate their associates and respect the work they do and the sacrifices they make. True leaders never ask others to do what they themselves are unwilling to do. We *lead* the flock, not *drive* it, and that means the shepherd is the first one to meet the difficulties and dangers. We encourage our co-workers *and never exploit them*.

No matter what David had in his hand, he used it to glorify God and to serve others—a sling, a sword or spear, a harp, and even a cup of cold water. Leadership is built on character, and character reveals itself in small things as well as big things. Jesus promised a reward to those who give a cup of cold water to one of His disciples (Matt. 10:42), but there is also a reward for those who will not drink that water but in an act of worship give it to the Lord.

### **Stewards of the King (Isaiah 22:15-25)**

This passage contains six images that teach us about leadership: the steward, the ball, the father, the key, the peg, and the throne.

Shebna was King Hezekiah’s chief steward, second in command in the palace. He was a selfish and dishonest man

who used his position to get as much as he could for himself: some royal chariots (v. 18), an elegant robe (v. 21), and an elaborate tomb carved out of the rock (v. 16). In every way, Shebna typifies leaders who live for themselves and get for themselves whatever they want, at somebody else's expense. Their confidence is in themselves and what the world has to offer.

But like worldly-minded executives today, Shebna ignored the fact that judgment was coming. King Hezekiah demoted Shebna to being a court secretary and put Eliakim in his place. Shebna had to forfeit his official wardrobe, his chariots, and his elaborate tomb, because God hurled him like a ball into another country where he died and was buried unwept, unhonored, and unsung. Leaders in our society are stewards, even though we don't always use the word, and they must one day give an account of their stewardship. If they are found unfaithful, they are punished. Shebna also forfeited his large wooden key, the symbol of his high position in the palace. No more would he open the doors.

Eliakim models to us the obedient steward and pictures our Lord Jesus Christ, who holds the key of the house of David (v. 22; Rev. 3:7). "What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (Rev. 3:7). Leaders are people of authority, and they must be faithful to use their keys to open the right doors and not to satisfy their own desires. Jesus is the "key man" in the kingdom; apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). We may wonder why some doors are open and others shut, but our Lord holds the key and uses it wisely. (See Acts 16:6-10.) I can look back on my own ministry and give thanks that some of the doors I wanted the Lord to open stayed closed, and that doors I thought would remain shut were opened by Him in His good time.

As leaders, we are not only stewards but also "fathers" (v. 21). "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a



father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:11-12). While this concept may be carried too far, there is a sense in which a staff is a family and occasionally needs “fathering.” I was impressed to see that the final chapter in *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* by Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley<sup>[9]</sup> is entitled “Leading with Love.” According to 1 Corinthians 13, if we don’t have love we don’t have anything, and love never fails.

A fifth image is that of the peg (vv. 23-25). A peg was driven into the main tent pole so various vessels could be hung from it, and in the palace it was driven into the wall. Leadership means carrying responsibilities and bearing burdens; and while some burdens can be shared with others (Gal. 6:2), leaders have special burdens that cannot be shared (Gal. 6:5). President Harry Truman used to say, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” Using the image of the peg, we could paraphrase President Truman, “If you can’t stand the weight, get out of the palace.” It’s good to know that the Lord knows about our burdens and helps us carry them and get the work done (Pss. 55:22; 68:19; 1 Pet. 5:7).

The last image is that of the throne (v. 23): “he [Eliakim] will become a seat [throne] of honor for the house of his father.” The purpose of our stewardship is not to honor ourselves but to glorify the Lord, and we do that by being faithful. Because of Eliakim’s character and position, he was like a throne, a place of honor, to his family. It wasn’t the seat that made him kingly; rather, Eliakim made the seat into a throne.

In recent years we’ve read reports of the “perks” and the extravagant and expensive retirement gifts some CEOs have received, and we have been astounded. We have wondered what they did to deserve them. In the Christian life, we don’t get our rewards twice. If we seek rewards

from people here and now, and we receive them, then we won't be rewarded by the Lord when we get to heaven (Matt. 6:1-4). It's far better to do our work today because we love Jesus, and let Him take care of the rewards later, because the Lord always gives us much more than we deserve.

## **The Rock and the River (Isaiah 32:1-2)**

The prophet is writing about the future messianic kingdom when the Lord will reign and His people with Him.

See, a king will reign in righteousness  
and rulers will rule with justice.  
Each one will be like a shelter from the wind  
and a refuge from the storm,  
like streams of water in the desert  
and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land (Isa. 32:1-2).

Isaiah opened his book of prophecy by pointing out the unrighteousness of the Jewish nation and its rulers. "Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom," he said to the king and princes who permitted the people to worship idols and openly disobey God's law (Isa. 1:10). Israel was an unrighteous nation led by unrighteous leaders, and its day of judgment was coming. But the prophet looked down the avenue of the ages and saw the day when God's perfect King would establish His kingdom. Isaac Watts found this same truth in Psalm 72 and put it into a great hymn:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does its successive journey run;  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

But our Lord's reign will also include His faithful servants whose lives, ministries, and martyrdoms have earned them their thrones. (See Matt. 19:27-30; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10; 20:6.) Because the law was ignored and violated in Isaiah's day, the poor and needy had no one to help them get

justice; but that won't happen when Jesus reigns. "He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness" (Isa. 9:7). I suggest that the Lord is looking for leaders like this today, leaders we can compare to rocks and rivers.

Rocks are very sturdy and change slowly, but rivers are always changing. The phrase "as weak as water" is true—except when there are floods and tsunamis, for large amounts of water can be very destructive when in motion. Leaders must know when to stand firm and refuse change and when to adapt and allow for change. This isn't compromise; it's simply common sense and wisdom. If there are too many rocks in the river, it may become a swamp.

Large rocks were appreciated in the Holy Land because they provided shade from the hot sun and shelter from the driving storms. At the same time, the river has its ministry in supplying refreshing water to the parched traveler. Leaders must be both rivers and rocks, givers and protectors, people who provide refreshment in the struggles of life and refuge in the storms of life. If leaders are always like rocks, the organization isn't likely to make much progress; but if they are always like rivers, changing frequently and taking only the easiest course, the organization will experience confusion and probably failure.

It would make our task much easier if all of our associates were balanced. But the wise leader knows that some people are rocks and always will be rocks, while others are rivers and "go with the flow"; and perhaps neither will change. The skillful leader listens to both the rocks and the rivers and reminds everyone that there is value in seeing all sides of a problem or an opportunity. The sanctified obstructionist who says "As long as I'm on this board, there will be no unanimous votes" must either get balanced or get out, because that is not the way of wisdom. It's sad when a staff member mistakes stubbornness for conviction or novelty for progress, but these are the things leaders have to deal

with, and with patience and prayer most of these differences can be worked out.

**W**hat is there about the third generation that seems to carry with it the seeds of destruction?

My wife and I watched as three excellent department stores went out of business when the third generations of the controlling families took over, and more than one church has suffered the same fate when the founders' grandchildren became officers. Some of my rural friends tell me that when the third generation takes over a farm, it often results in a new subdivision. I realize that many factors are involved in these complex transactions, but there's also the possibility that "easy come and easy go" plays a big role, along with the unhappy decay of family tradition. We find the same phenomenon in the history of Israel.

The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the LORD had done for Israel. . . . After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals (Judg. 2:7, 10-11).

What was the cause of this national apostasy? Either the second generation didn't teach the third generation to love and serve Jehovah, or, if they did teach them, then the

younger generation refused to accept God's truth and turned instead to their neighbors' idols. "In those days [the days of the judges] Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). The "me generation" had triumphed. The third generation hadn't seen God's great works and didn't believe what their elders reported to them.

The apostle Paul was greatly concerned about the future of the churches he had founded, for he knew that every church is only one generation short of extinction. (This is also true of every Christian ministry.) He wrote to Timothy, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2). For a business to fail or a piece of real estate to be re-zoned is one thing, but for the people of God to fail in their worship and witness is quite something else. Like the church today, Israel had some important tasks to fulfill in this world, and they couldn't succeed if they failed to develop godly believers in every generation.

But one of Israel's greatest leadership failures occurred soon after the death of King Solomon when his son Rehoboam took the throne. No matter how much wisdom and wealth Solomon had, he was a poor example to his son and did not prepare him to reign. David had rescued and established the kingdom, and Solomon had made the kingdom rich and famous, but Rehoboam foolishly divided the kingdom and weakened it politically and spiritually. Rehoboam was from the third generation. The historian wrote, "He [Rehoboam] did evil because he had not set his heart on seeking the LORD" (2 Chron. 12:14). The King James Version reads, "And he did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the LORD." Unless we are prepared to seek the Lord, we are not prepared to be leaders for the Lord. Why should anyone follow us if we aren't following the

Lord? “Follow my example,” wrote Paul, “as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Rehoboam was unprepared to lead the nation. Solomon failed to prepare his son to be the next king because he himself wasn’t obeying God. “The shipwreck of Solomon is surely the most terrible tragedy in all the world,”[\[10\]](#) said Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte. Solomon maintained peace during his reign not by winning battles as David did but by wooing women and marrying the daughters of pagan kings. Here’s the official record:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been (1 Kings 11:1-4).

All of this, of course, was in direct violation of Deuteronomy 17:14-17. “But under Solomon, the kingdom became immensely wealthy and famous,” someone might argue. True—but at the same time, the king and the kingdom were growing more and more idolatrous. “The secret worm,” said Alexander Whyte, “was gnawing all the time in the royal staff upon which Solomon leaned.”[\[11\]](#) The nation’s wealth, peace, and fame were but thin veneers over the rottenness of idolatry that ultimately ruined the kingdom. Solomon was gifted in multiplying—wives, horses, and wealth—but his son was gifted in dividing. Both were destroyers.

Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:18-19, “I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish?” Thanks to the waywardness and neglect of Solomon, his son turned out to

be foolish. The mathematics of their morality was miserable. The sad account is in 1 Kings 12.

Instead of listening to the wisdom of the experienced older counselors, Rehoboam followed the advice of the proud young politicians of his own generation. He became a taskmaster instead of a burden-bearer and would not be a servant of the people. In order to maintain his expensive lifestyle, Solomon had laid heavy taxes on the people and “scourged them with whips” (1 Kings 12:11), but Rehoboam promised to scourge them with scorpions! No wonder the kingdom divided. Judah and Benjamin remained with Rehoboam, but the northern ten tribes went their own way and formed the kingdom of Israel.

From the mistakes of Rehoboam, let’s identify a few leadership principles.

- *Leaders must learn from the past.* In the introduction to his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel wrote, “What experience and history teach is this—that peoples and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.” In other words, the one thing we learn from history is that we *don’t* learn from history. I wonder what Rehoboam was doing while his father was sowing the seeds of failure and hiding behind a façade of prosperity. Did the young prince obey Deuteronomy 17:18–20 and write out his own copy of God’s Law and study it? Surely he could have taken time to read his grandfather’s psalms and even his father’s proverbs. The older counselors could have shared with him some of the lessons of the past had he humbled himself and listened to them.
- *Leaders must understand the present times and know the needs of their people.* Did Rehoboam ever mingle with the people and discover what their legitimate grievances were? By the way, his name means “may the people expand”; but to Rehoboam, the people weren’t



“expandable”—they were expendable! After David had enlarged the kingdom, he had sought to enrich the people spiritually, and Solomon had begun his reign with that same caring attitude; but Rehoboam abandoned it completely. As busy as He was, Jesus took time to listen to individuals who approached Him. He shared their burdens, because He was a shepherd who cared for the sheep. Had Rehoboam felt the burdens and hurts of the people, he would have known better what to do. But “the king did not listen to the people” (1 Kings 12:15).

- *Leaders must be devoted to God’s Word.* The key passage is Deuteronomy 17:14–20, and I recommend that you read and ponder it. Rehoboam would have especially benefited from the statement in verse 20 that the king must “not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites.” The new king also needed to recall God’s admonition to Joshua: “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you . . . that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Josh. 1:7–8). Rehoboam’s idea of prosperity and success had nothing to do with pleasing God or helping the people. He focused mainly on himself.

We read the Scriptures to learn more about the works of God and to gain an accurate assessment of past events, both victories and defeats. Dr. A. T. Pierson used to say, “History is His story,” and he was right. “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6). I once asked a clerk in a Florida bookshop for a book on the American Civil War, and she asked, “Which side?” As I pondered her question,

she pointed to the shelves and said, “Here we have the northern viewpoint, here the southern, and this shelf is neutral.” But the Bible isn’t written like a campaign biography or a political tract; it tells the truth and warns us not to follow bad examples. Yes, secular historians have differing viewpoints on important events and people, but not so the people who wrote the Scriptures, who “though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21).

David’s reign was like the soft shower that brings refreshment and life (2 Sam. 23:1–4), but the reign of Rehoboam was like a driving rain that ruins the crops (Prov. 28:3). Rehoboam was unwilling to serve the people; like his father Solomon, he expected them to serve him. His mother was an Ammonite (1 Kings 14:31; see also Deut. 23:3), and his father worshiped pagan gods and goddesses (1 Kings 11:1–13). Rehoboam could have made better choices because he knew better than to follow these bad examples, but he chose to be selfish and proud. He had it in his power to cleanse the kingdom of idols and call the people to worship only Jehovah, the God of Israel, but he made the wrong decision and compromised. The results? Read 1 Kings 14:21–15:8.



**I**n the previous chapter I may have given you the impression that leaders must always take a poll before they make decisions, but it's obvious that consensus is no assurance that we have found the will of God. Yes, we should listen to others, provided they are wise and experienced, know God, and want His best for us. They must be leaders and not cheerleaders. But the ten unbelieving spies at Kadesh (Num. 13-14) and the leaders of the ship taking Paul to Rome (Acts 27:9-26) are proof that the majority is not always right. People quote, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers" (Prov. 11:14), or "Surely you need guidance to wage war, and victory is won through many advisers" (Prov. 24:6); but these verses don't tell the whole story.

When it comes to waging war, a general does need many advisers. There are so many aspects to warfare that no one person can grasp the total picture. Even in a small business or a local church, the leaders must keep in touch with "living reality" or they will be functioning on the basis of illusions or hearsay. Honest discussion, prayer, and even loving disagreement (see Acts 15) can be used by the Lord to give guidance, *but it is the leader who must make the final decision*. President Harry Truman had a sign on his desk that read, "The buck stops here." No matter how many

counselors a leader may consult, it is the leader who weighs the possibilities and charts the course. We can't "pass the buck" and blame somebody else if we make a mistake.

This means that leaders must have times of uninterrupted solitude when they can think and pray, search the Scriptures, ponder the issues and study the factors involved, and then come to wise decisions. This brings us to Exodus 33:7-11:

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. . . . As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. . . . The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.

This tent was not the tabernacle, for the tabernacle had not yet been constructed, and the tabernacle always stood in the center of the camp. This was a private tent where Moses could meet with God and not be interrupted. Others could go there and receive counsel, but the tent was primarily for the benefit of Moses. There he would converse with God as friend with friend and would come to understand better the heart and mind of the Lord as well as his own inner needs. God had promised to help him, and Moses made use of the promise.

The most important part of our lives is the part that only God sees. Wherever Abraham went, he not only pitched his tent but also built an altar so he could worship God (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:18). Even while hiding in a cave, David turned the cave into a holy of holies and worshiped the Lord (Ps. 57 title). During one part of his journey to Jerusalem, the apostle Paul walked from Troas to Assos—a distance of about twenty miles—probably to have time alone to think and pray as he contemplated going to Jerusalem (Acts 20:13-14). Jesus arose early in the morning so He could spend time alone with the Father (Mark 1:35-39; see also Isa. 50:4-5). Leaders can decay and their work decline if

they are more concerned with impressing people than pleasing God. Paying more attention to the press releases than to the Scriptures and failing to heed the counsel of those who love God and love us will usually lead to failure. When we are so busy that we have no time for the Master, we are obviously too busy. “Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Mark 14:37–38). Exit interviews with Christian workers who have “fallen off the Bible” indicate that a neglect of private prayer and Bible meditation usually marked the beginning of their spiritual decline. It may look like somebody “fell into sin,” but that fall was probably preceded by a gradual decline. The word Jeremiah used was “backsliding” (Jer. 2:19; 3:22).

But Jeremiah doesn’t just warn us about the sin of backsliding; he also gives us God’s promise, “I will cure you of backsliding” (Jer. 3:22). The verb “cure” suggests that backsliding is like sickness: it begins secretly, causes gradual decline, and then results in sudden failure. It produces discomfort and pain and a loss of appetite, *and it can make the victims toxic so that they can infect others!* Alert Christians can usually tell when their spiritual appetite is weak, their spiritual disciplines have been ignored, and their spiritual energy is low—these are all symptoms that they need to go to the Great Physician for healing.

Jeremiah also warns us against a hasty and incomplete diagnosis and, even worse, superficial treatment. “They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14; 8:11; see also Ezek. 13:10). The Lord probes deeply into our hearts and minds and will not permit us to lie to Him (Ps. 139:23–24), although we may try to lie to ourselves (1 John 1:5–10). I heard about a patient whose physician showed her the X-rays and explained that she desperately

needed an operation. Her response was, “Doctor, can’t you just retouch the X-rays?”

God’s promise is that He will heal us if we humbly come to Him, honestly confess our sins, and believingly claim His promises. “Yes, we will come to you, for you are the LORD our God” (Jer. 3:22).



**B**ruce Barton's book *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus*[\[12\]](#) was first published in the United States in 1924 and was probably one of the first attempts in print to turn Jesus into a modern CEO. The author pounced on our Lord's words in Luke 2:49 (KJV) —“wist [know] ye not that I must be about my Father's business?”[\[13\]](#)—and instantly the boy Jesus became a successful businessman! Chapter one is boldly entitled “The Executive,” and chapter six is called “The Founder of Modern Business.” There have been several books on management published recently that present Jesus as a CEO, one of which finds eighty-five parallels between Jesus and today's successful executive.

Let me confess right up front that I don't see Jesus in the role of a CEO.

Our Lord certainly was an effective and exemplary leader, and when He called people, many were willing to follow Him (Matt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9). He trained His disciples skillfully, He used His resources wisely, and He accomplished His work perfectly. But I find it difficult to compare Him to a contemporary CEO. For one thing, He never made a mistake or had to say “I'm sorry; please forgive me,” as most of us have had to do more than once. He never misunderstood people, because He knew exactly

what was in their hearts (John 2:24-25). He exercised absolute authority over creation, including the weather. I don't know one CEO who has any of these abilities. Nobody ever called Jesus "boss," because His title was always "Lord"—*and it still is*. When Peter tried to give Jesus advice, he was soundly rebuked (Matt. 16:21-23), because Jesus didn't lead by consensus. He knew what He was doing and He never made a mistake.

Furthermore, Jesus lived and died not to run a business but to establish His church, and He never once even hinted that His church was a business. The Jewish temple was a "religious business" when Jesus was here on earth, and twice He had to evict the money changers and animal peddlers. He did tell parables involving business and money, but He never suggested that the church should measure its success by the treasurer's report or the head count from the ushers. "Silver or gold I do not have," said Peter (Acts 3:6), nor did he have any perks or fringe benefits. Neither Jesus nor His apostles saw people as customers to count; they saw people as sheep desperately needing a shepherd. Jesus promised to be with us even if only two or three are gathered for worship (Matt. 18:20). So much for the head count.

"Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone" (Rom. 12:17) commands us to follow excellent business practices, and "doing the will of God from your heart" (Eph. 6:6) admonishes us to have the right motives in all we do. "For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you" (1 Thess. 2:3).

According to James 3:13-18, there are two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom that comes from God and the wisdom that comes from this world. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 we are taught that the wisdom from this world is a threat to Christian thinking and must, like poison in the laboratory, be handled carefully but not allowed to get into our system.



Just because something “works” for the world doesn’t mean it is right for God’s people. *If Christians are to make a difference in this world, they must avoid thinking like the world and imitating the world. Right planning and right serving begin with right thinking, and right thinking comes from the wisdom of God.*

The mind and heart of Jesus were filled with the wisdom of God because He knew the Word of God and was taught by the Spirit of God. The unbelieving religious leaders in His time were spiritually blind and could not understand what Jesus was teaching or doing. John 7 records a clear example of this, so please pause to read the entire chapter. You will discover a number of contrasts between the thinking of Jesus and the thinking of His unconverted half brothers[[14](#)] who thought like the world. The chapter deals with several fundamentals of leadership as depicted in what our Lord said and did.

### **God’s Timing (John 7:1-13)**

Time is a precious commodity both to leaders and to followers, because it presents us with many opportunities to grow, serve others, and achieve goals. We usually list the three tenses as “past, present, and future,” but this is in the wrong order. Time flows out of the future into the present and then into the past, and it flows quickly. We can’t reclaim time past, although we can remember it, read about it, and hear people discuss it. We aren’t sure how much future time we have left, and it’s dangerous to be overconfident. Ralph W. Sockman said, “Time is the deposit each one has in the bank of God, and no one knows the balance.”

“What is your life?” asked James. “You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (James 4:14-15). The wise leader thanks God for each new day and, as a good steward, makes the best use of

it. “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is” (Eph. 5:15–17). Doing God’s will rescues us from wasting God’s precious gift of time. Even Henry David Thoreau, who signed off early from the Concord church, wrote in chapter one of *Walden*, “As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.”

Most people use calendars, clocks, and handy electronic devices to maintain sensible schedules, but according to Jesus, time in the lives of saved people is different from time in the lives of the unsaved. Jesus said to His unconverted brothers, “My time is not yet here; for you any time will do” (John 7:6). The children of God live by a divine timetable as they seek to accomplish God’s will and do the “good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). Our decisions, our goals, our defeats, and our delays are all in the Father’s hand, because our times are in His hands (Ps. 31:15). Personally, I dislike delays and don’t enjoy being kept waiting; but more than once, the delay has proved to be a blessing from God’s hand.

As we serve the Lord in the power of the Spirit, we transform precious time into the currency of eternity, knowing that we will meet it again at the throne of God. Wasted time means not only lost opportunities today but also lost rewards in eternity. “It is precisely because of the eternity outside time that everything in time becomes valuable and important and meaningful,” wrote Dorothy Sayers. “Everything we do here . . . should be rightly related to what we eternally are.” No wonder Moses prayed, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). If there is no eternity, time loses its value.

Jesus got His orders each day as He met with the Father, prayed, and meditated on the Scriptures. “He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being

taught. The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears” (Isa. 50:4-5; see also Mark 1:35). Jesus lived on the timetable ordained by His Father, and we can trace this timetable in John’s Gospel (2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1). He said to His brothers, “My time is not yet here; for you any time will do” (7:6). What an indictment against unsaved people: “any time will do!” Lost people make plans but do so without seeking to follow any divine plans. What they do with their time and money has little or no relationship to the Lord. “For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will be destroyed” (Ps. 1:6). Good leadership involves recognizing that we serve an eternal God and that whatever we do in His will carries eternal value.

### **God’s Word (John 7:14-17)**

I was chatting with a co-worker about our work schedule and, I’m embarrassed to say, quietly complaining about how well-meaning people interrupted us, made impossible demands of us, and often wasted our precious time. He agreed with me, and then softly added, “But there is always time for the will of God.”

When we find ourselves running out of time, it’s possible that we have been running ahead of God and not taking time to be holy. Waiting on the Lord is as important as working for the Lord. “Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary” (Isa. 40:30-31 NASB).

At the right time, Jesus did go to the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, knowing that in the Father’s will He was safe from those who wanted to kill Him. As the people listened to Him teach, they were amazed at His knowledge of spiritual truth, for they knew He had never attended a rabbinical

school or been tutored by a great teacher. His apostles got the same rating from the Jewish religious leaders who “realized that they [Peter and John] were unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4:13). Jesus called fishermen, not learned rabbis, to be His followers.

This in no way discredits formal biblical training or theological education. The apostles were taught by Jesus, who personally equipped them for their work—and our Lord still does that today (Heb. 13:20–21). But no matter how many preachers and teachers we hear, or how many textbooks we study, the important thing is that we are “God-taught” and not “man-taught.” If the Spirit doesn’t write the truth on our hearts, the truth will never control our lives. The Holy Spirit teaches those who are teachable *and who are willing to obey what God tells them to do*.

How we respond to the Word of God day by day determines whether or not we will know the will of God. The British preacher F. W. Robertson said that obedience was the key to spiritual knowledge, and he pointed to John 7:17: “Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” The NASB reads, “If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching.” The will of God is not a buffet from which we select the things we most enjoy. God spreads the entire meal on the table and expects us to accept all of it and enjoy it. If we are willing to obey, the Father is willing to reveal His plans to us; if we are only investigating the possibilities and postponing our decision, He will not cooperate.

“God’s guidance is plain when we are true,” said F. W. Robertson, and Chinese preacher Watchman Nee agreed with him when he wrote, “Knowledge of the will of God is not so much a matter of finding the right method as being the right man.” We’re back to the emphasis on Christian character. People who only toy with the will of God are jeopardizing their future and are in danger of missing the

great privilege and joy of serving God in the right place. Leaders must “delight in the law of the LORD and meditate on his law day and night” (Ps. 1:2). This means applying God’s truth to themselves and to every situation and decision. Once we start making exceptions, we will start going on detours, and detours are costly.

I cannot conceive of a leader ignoring the Bible and not asking for God’s guidance each day and throughout the day. When the phone rings or the intercom buzzes, when we read the mail and the departmental memos, when somebody asks to see us, when a crisis suddenly appears, we must instantly lift our hearts to God in prayer and seek His guidance. Nehemiah has always been my model in this, for as he supervised the restoration of the ruined city of Jerusalem, he often sent “telegraph prayers” to the Lord for help he needed, and God never failed him. If we follow his example, God will never fail us.

### **God’s Glory (John 7:18-36)**

At the conclusion of a tour of St. Paul’s Cathedral, we were asked by our guide if we had any questions, and my wife said, “Why was this cathedral built?” It was a good question, because St. Paul’s is a complex amalgam of mausoleum, museum, architectural masterpiece, concert hall, art gallery, and worship center. “Why was it built?” asked the guide. “Why, to the glory of God!” We hadn’t heard anything about God during the tour, but we took her word for it. She knew British history better than we did.

Successful leadership is not for the glory of the leader or the organization but for the glory of the Lord; if any other motive prevails, God will not bless. “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols” (Isa. 42:8). How easy it is for a leader to become an idol, or for the organization itself to become an idol to the leaders. The “Cornelius complex” is abroad, and people are

bowing down to “great leaders” as if they were the Lord Himself. “As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. ‘Stand up,’ he said, “I am only human myself” (Acts 10:25–26). Every leader should say to himself or herself at the start of each day, “I am only human myself.”

“Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory,” said Jesus, “but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him” (John 7:18). Knowing He was sent by the Father and wanting only to glorify the Father, Jesus had the courage to stand alone and declare the truth even when the religious leaders opposed Him and some wanted to kill Him.

When we start playing God, the Lord has ways of reminding us that we are clay. Consider some of the kings mentioned in Scripture who exalted themselves and were humbled by the Lord: Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:16), Hezekiah (2 Chron. 32:25), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4), Belshazzar (Dan. 5), and Herod (Acts 12:19–24). Peter boasted that he would never deny Jesus but would die for Him, and within a few hours was weeping over his three denials of the Lord. “Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight” (Isa. 5:21). ““God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Pet. 5:5–6).

“Stop judging by mere appearances,” warned Jesus, “but instead judge correctly” (John 7:24). When we judge by appearances, we are living by sight and not by faith in the Word of God. The real world is not what we see around us or what is displayed to us in the various media. The real world is what is described in the Bible. People may say, “As sure as the world,” but the Bible says “the world is passing away” (1 John 2:17 NKJV). We are told that we live in an “enlightened world,” yet Scripture calls it a “dark world” (Eph. 6:12) and points to Jesus as “the light of the world”

(John 8:12). We need to keep in mind what God said to the prophet Samuel: “The LORD does not look at the things human beings look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

The late librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin wrote in the introduction to his insightful book *The Image*, “We Americans suffer primarily not from our vices or our weaknesses, but from our illusions. We are haunted, not by reality, but by those images we have put in place of reality.”[\[15\]](#) What he says about the American people can be said of all people who are exposed to modern media, much of which is exported from the United States.

The practice of transforming successful people into idols is often based on “mere appearances” and not on truth. God is looking for transparent servants and not playacting celebrities. He desires servants who will glorify Him and not promote themselves. If God wants to make a leader famous, as He did with Joshua (Josh. 3:7), David (1 Sam. 18:6–8), and Paul (Acts 19:15), that is His decision, because true promotion can come only from God (1 Sam. 2:7–8; Ps. 75:6–7). If we care for our character, the Lord will protect our reputation, and, after all, He is the final judge.

### **God’s Spirit (John 7:37-44)**

The Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was a joyful week of celebration during which the people lived in booths made of branches to remind them of their ancestors who had lived in temporary dwellings throughout their years of desert wandering. The temple courts were illuminated by large candlesticks to remind the people of the pillar of fire that had guided their ancestors, and each day some of the priests would carry water from the Pool of Siloam and pour it out in the temple to remind them that God gave Israel water from the rock to sustain the nation (Exod. 17:1–7).

On the seventh and greatest day of the feast, when the priests were pouring out the water, Jesus shouted to the crowd and offered living water to all who would come to Him and believe on Him. “By this he meant the Spirit,” John explains in verse 39. In Scripture, water for drinking is a symbol of the Spirit of God, and water for washing is a symbol of the Word of God (John 15:3; Eph. 5:26). The rock refers to the Messiah who was smitten for us, for apart from His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus could not have sent the Spirit into the world. As believers, we receive the Spirit at conversion and can experience repeated fillings of the Spirit as we serve. We don’t have the authority to impart the Holy Spirit to others, because only Jesus can do that.

If we are to receive God’s wisdom, follow God’s timing, understand God’s Word, and bring glory to God’s name, we must have the fullness of the Holy Spirit. As Christians who are leaders, we cannot succeed the way God wants us to succeed unless the Spirit is enlightening us and enabling us in every area of our lives. Would you want to serve under a leader who had no love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (See Gal. 5:22-23.) No matter how well-trained or experienced we may be, if we lack the power of the Spirit we can “do nothing” that will please God and glorify Jesus (John 15:5).

“Do what God tells you,” said evangelist D. L. Moody. “There is no use in running before you are sent; there is no use in attempting to do God’s work without God’s power. . . . We shall not lose anything if we tarry till we get this power.”

### **God’s Providence (John 7:45-53)**

We have gone full circle, from God’s timing to God’s providence: it was not yet the time for Jesus to be arrested. God not only *sees* what lies before but *plans* what will take



place. God has a plan and at the right time will work each part of His plan to accomplish His will (Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:28–29; 1 Pet. 1:2). If God only sees events that lie ahead but does not determine them, then somebody else is in control of these events and therefore has dethroned God. This we cannot accept. This does not mean that God is to blame for the wicked deeds of sinful people, but that He rules and overrules in all the affairs of the universe to bring about His wonderful will.

Perhaps one of the joys of heaven will be the privilege of looking back at our lives and seeing *why* things happened *when* they did, and *what* the Lord accomplished through those events. If that does happen, I'm sure we will all give thanks and praise to the Lord when we understand God's complete plan.

Perhaps we should start rehearsing today.



One of the most serious activities of the dedicated leader is the engineering of change. This is especially true if the organization has an illustrious founder who still runs things from the grave, or if the reputation of the organization has hidden from the official family and the public the dangerous cracks that are creeping through the structure. So, let's think about change.

In His wisdom, the Lord has structured human life around generations. A younger generation comes on the scene and is trained by the older generation. The new generation examines and evaluates what the older generation has bequeathed to them, retains some of it, discards some of it, and puts the remainder on hold. Things move on, for better or for worse, but not for long. Since there are several generations active at any given time in society, criticism and change seem to be constantly at work. Some changes mean progress; on others the jury is still out; and some changes are downright dangerous—but, here comes change, ready or not!

I once heard a frustrated student say, "I wish I had lived in the New Testament world when things were more solid and stable." But he was wrong; the New Testament world was anything but stable. "This was an era of change and upheaval," wrote S. Angus in *The Environment of Early*

*Christianity.* “The unexpected repeatedly happened. Events outstripped theory. . . . Men were driven from their old moorings and had not yet become accustomed to the new order. The average man was perplexed by the rapid march of history. . . . The systems which held men together . . . were broken down.”[\[16\]](#) That description sounds quite contemporary, because we live in a rapidly changing world.

For the Bible’s viewpoint on this matter, read Hebrews 12:25–27:

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

God shakes things so that wise people might be able to separate the temporary from the permanent, the scaffolding from the edifice, and thereby build on things eternal that cannot be shaken.

If change is a normal part of human life, why is it so disturbing today? For one thing, change today occurs so quickly that we don’t seem to have time to evaluate things and decide what we want to assimilate. We are bombarded by the media and pressured by society to “get with it” and move into the future. If we don’t depend on the newest electronic communication devices and plug into all the latest information, then we belong to a dead civilization that still reads books and writes handwritten letters. Shame on us!

I sat next to a well-known businessman at a banquet, a man whose name and stores were known nationwide. We got to discussing a certain deceased preacher whom he had liked very much, and I told him I had some information about this preacher that he might want to read. When I asked for his mailing address, he took some return-address

stickers out of his pocket, the kind you receive in donor appeals from charity organizations. He carefully tore off one sticker and handed it to me. This man was an American icon! I expected to receive an embossed business card, but I suppose his kind of stewardship was another step toward making your first million. It didn't seem to embarrass him. I admired his courage to be himself. His stores were modern, but his personal habits were economical.

Another reason why change is threatening to many people is that today's changes are deep and radical and not just on the surface of life. They touch not only the fun and the fashions but also the foundations. Our word "radical" comes from a Latin word that means "root." Radical change goes deep into the very roots of life; it questions almost everything and takes very little for granted. When I was studying history in high school and college, we assumed that the leaders we read about said what they meant and meant what they said, but today not everybody makes that assumption. Were Washington and Lincoln truly patriots? Did Jefferson tell the truth when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, or is it only a piece of political propaganda? Was the Constitution of the United States primarily a shield to protect the wealthy colonial leaders?

Not only is change today rapid and radical, but many changes are being generated by young people rather than the usual crowd of experienced leaders. In past decades change typically came "from the top down," but today it often comes from the bottom up. It was after the Second World War that the youthful citizens became the movers and shakers in society. For one thing, there were millions of them. They were also good customers, easy to influence and with pockets full of undesignated funds to spend. Thanks to teen movies, magazines, fashions, and music, they were in the driver's seat, and the manufacturers and retailers began to pay attention to them. The rest is history.

I phoned a friend for advice to help solve a computer problem; he didn't have his car handy, so he sent his teenage daughter to help me out. "She knows more about computers than I do anyway," he assured me. She bicycled over and in five minutes not only solved the problem but also fixed another matter I didn't even know was a problem! How many people have a "computer doctor" that makes house calls? And at that young age?

"You young people grew up with computers and you sure understand them," I remarked.

"Yes," she said with an impish smile. "The Lord put us here to help you old people!" She stayed for about an hour, and we had a great conversation with lots of laughs.

The longshoreman philosopher Eric Hoffer commented on this generational matter in his book *First Things, Last Things*. He wrote, "The vanishing of the present is hard on grownups. It devalues their experience, skills and convictions, and reduces them to the level of adolescents."[\[17\]](#) He should have written "reduces them to the level of first graders," because it's the adolescents in society who seem to savvy what's going on in the world of electronic communications.

Hoffer also wrote, "It is the malady of our age that the young people are so busy teaching us that they have no time left to learn."[\[18\]](#) I'm not sure his statement is as true today as it was decades ago. Many of the young people I know seem anxious to listen to us "veterans" and learn about the past. They are even willing to read "the classics" and discuss them. I don't know what is causing this, but I'm glad it's happening.



It isn't easy to be a change agent, but I find that it helps to have a positive attitude toward the idea, even if I don't agree with all the details. Change for the sake of change is

only cosmetic and can produce nothing but novelty. A new logo, a new slogan, or new packaging may generate a bit of excitement inside the organization and perhaps some consumer attention outside, but it may not last too long. A bank in our city has had four different names in the last twenty years, but not much has changed inside. There's nothing essentially wrong with putting a new band on an old bonnet, unless what the company really needs is a new bonnet—or a new “head” wearing the old bonnet.



18

**M**ost people work for some kind of organization, so let's think about organizations and the leaders who must inspire and direct the people in them.

The sixties turned out to be a frightening and challenging era. Events were influenced primarily by people who wanted to take over or take apart just about everything their elders had sacrificed to build. However, once they had succeeded, these youthful crusaders didn't know how to put things back together again. The subtitle of Professor Gerard J. DeGroot's fascinating book *The Sixties Unplugged* says it best: "A Kaleidoscope History of a Disorderly Decade." The author explains that he used the metaphor of a kaleidoscope because "most of what happened in the 1960s lacked coherent logic. In order to convey this, I have resisted the temptation to impose order."[\[19\]](#) That's a courageous feat for a professional historian, but he managed it skillfully.

Examine the galaxies above you, the natural world around you, and the systems functioning within you, and you will discover order. The components of creation are organized, and this makes possible the activities and discoveries of modern science. Were it not for the laws the Creator has built into creation, we could never have put astronauts on

the moon and brought them safely home again. Dictators operate most successfully in times of chaos, but free people are governed by officials who build on foundations of law and order. The purpose of law and law enforcement personnel is to keep order in society; if we must make changes, we do it legally and carefully. It's difficult to conceive of freedom apart from order and order apart from law.

Our God is a God of order, even when what He does seems disorderly to us. The first two chapters in the Bible describe the Lord bringing order out of chaos, and the last two chapters describe Him doing it again when time ends and eternity is ushered in. Whatever chaos the Bible describes between these two great events is our fault and not God's.

On the staff of one of the churches I pastored was a young man who liked to remind us, "The church is an organism, not an organization." The first time you hear that statement, it might impress you as being clever, but further thought will reveal how meaningless and impractical it really is. *If an organism isn't organized, it will die!*

Physicians, nurses, and other medical personnel take anatomy courses so they can understand the organization of the human body, which is an organized organism. When one part of the body becomes dysfunctional, it creates problems and pain in the other parts. I well remember the evening my gall bladder declared war on me. I thought I was having a heart attack. The result was a week in the hospital, climaxed by surgery. My organism had become disorganized.

What is an organization? This definition is not inspired, but it will get us started.

*An organization is a human instrument that enables people to work together creatively to reach specific goals. Should the instrument become more important than achieving the goals, it is in danger of becoming an institution whose major goal is survival.*



God can speak the word and create and maintain a complex yet orderly universe (Ps. 33:9), but establishing and sustaining a successful organization requires a great deal of human thought and activity. An organization is a *human* instrument, and even when leaders seek God's will and pray for God's blessing, they still must see to it that at least five essential elements are present: vision, division, supervision, provision, and revision.

## **Vision**

I recall the anxiety that gripped the leaders of many nonprofit organizations in the fifties when they attempted to write their "vision statements." Executives summoned board members, and they struggled together to express in one concise statement what the organization was supposed to be doing. It's hard to believe that these successful ministries and businesses didn't know what they had been doing when for decades they had been led by capable men and women who did their jobs well. It was as though the Lord said to them as He said to the prophet, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9).

The founders and first-generation leaders of an organization may not need a formal vision statement, because what they are called to do is probably written on their hearts. *However, when successive generations of leaders and workers come along, they need more specific information.* All it takes to go on a detour is a generation of leaders who tinker with history and forget what the organization is supposed to do. Many companies have an annual "family get-together" at which the leaders explain once again where the organization came from and what it's all about, and everybody is encouraged to give themselves enthusiastically to the corporate vision.

The vision statement expresses clearly and concisely the compelling passion and purpose of the organization. Peter

and John knew the early church's vision statement: "As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). What were the Christians doing? Speaking. Not waving banners, not protesting against the Sanhedrin or the Romans, but speaking. About what did they speak? About what Jesus had done and said. Peter could have mentioned that the church was caring for the poor and needy as well as for the foreign Jews who came to Jerusalem for the feasts, but those ministries, though important, were by-products of the apostles' preaching. Peter and John had the right vision: they told others what they had seen and heard about Jesus. That's still the Christian's job today.

Helen Keller became blind and deaf when she was eighteen months old. At age ten, with the assistance of her teacher Anne Sullivan, she began to learn to speak and later was able to read Braille as well. She was an inspiring person who didn't pity herself or expect pity from others. She once said, "The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight but has no vision."

"No vision" means we lack a defining purpose in life—a compelling motive for getting out of bed and getting busy doing something meaningful. "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me," Jesus told His disciples. "Night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4). The invisible becomes obvious and the impossible becomes doable to the person who has vision. I think it was Michelangelo who, having purchased what appeared to be a large, grotesque piece of marble, said, "Take it to my studio! There's an angel in there and I want to set him free!" He had vision.

Vision helps us keep going when the work is especially difficult. "But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost," wrote Paul, "because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me" (1 Cor. 16:8-9). Some people would interpret opposition as the

Lord's sign that they should move on to other pursuits, but not the person of faith and vision, for faith and vision enable us to see opportunities and overcome the obstacles. For the Christian, vision without work is hypocrisy, and for any servant, work without vision is drudgery. The big picture and the future goals help us handle the small details and the nasty obstructions.

The vision statement doesn't deal with glittering generalities but with specific activities and goals. It isn't a clever slogan or a piece of eloquent propaganda. I was at a banquet where a college president had met with the board all afternoon so he could announce the school's new vision statement, and it was this: "To become the finest Bible college in the world." This is a noble aspiration, but how do we measure our work to know whether we have attained that level of excellence? He probably should have said, "The purpose of our school is to equip the students physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually to discipline themselves, discover and develop their gifts, and dedicate themselves to the service of the Lord and His people." That would have given them a manageable target and a measureable goal.

## **Division**

By "division," I mean dividing up the responsibilities and bringing together the tasks and the talent, the assignments and the abilities, so that each stage of the work is in the hands of the most capable people. This responsibility lies primarily with management rather than with the executive leadership, but leaders must be sure that management knows what to do and is free to do it well.

It's a biblical principle that people who are faithful in working with a few small things can be trusted to be successful when promoted to work with many bigger things (Matt. 25:21). It was God's will that Joseph become the

second in command of the land of Egypt, but Joseph got his start serving in Potiphar's house. His excellent record earned him a promotion to being chief steward. David started out by providing music therapy for troubled King Saul, but then he became a soldier and an officer and ultimately the king of Israel. Nehemiah had an honorable position as the king's personal cupbearer, but his burden for Jerusalem and his prayers for the nation brought him finally an appointment as governor of the holy city. There he served God and the Jewish people by supervising the restoration of the walls and gates.

Organizations are weakened and can even be destroyed because of so-called leaders who lack the heart, mind, and will to put the right people into the right places, doing the right job. I recall an excellent school whose board made an unwise choice for president. The candidate's name was very well-known, but notoriety is no guarantee of ability. He didn't fit and didn't last. The board then named as president an alumnus of the school, a relatively unknown man whose ministry record proved he could do the job. The school was rescued. I can think of two publishing houses that were on the verge of collapse. One was rescued by the appointment of the right president; the other went under, led by the wrong president. Dr. Lee Roberson was right: "Everything rises and falls with leadership."

The trained people who work in the human resources office have many tools for testing and evaluating people, and we should make use of them. But leaders who have worked with the men and women on the corporate team should know something about their batting averages and how they respond (or react) when they hit home runs or when they strike out.

I once asked Ted Engstrom, "When you hire or promote somebody, what influences your decision the most?" He thought for a moment and said, "My own gut-level feelings." Pascal was right when he said, "The heart has its reasons

which reason does not know.” Psychiatrist Carl Jung called this kind of intuition “perception via the unconscious,” but that “unconscious” must be enlightened and enriched by personal experience and accurate information.

This is how true leaders produce other leaders.



**V***ision* brings the organization together and helps to keep it together, while *division* makes sure the right people are working in the right jobs. Our third essential element is *supervision*, which simply means oversight—making sure that the right people are doing the right work efficiently and observing the company policy.

## **Supervision**

Unless there is a serious crisis, neither executives nor board members should become micromanagers and engage in hands-on management. Their job is to define the vision, determine the policy, and direct the progress of the total operation; management's job is to expedite the work in the most efficient manner. There's certainly nothing wrong with executive personnel occasionally going "out and about" in the office or plant, so long as their presence isn't misinterpreted. There are some executives who are able to do excellent "pastoral work" among the employees, while there are others whose presence seems to sound an alarm and make people nervous. They ask, "What's the boss doing here?"

In short, effective leaders make sure workers are doing the right things, while effective managers make sure they

are doing things right. Both are necessary for corporate success and employee happiness.

Supervisors are usually selected from line workers who “know the ropes” and can untie most of the knots, people who have been on the job long enough to understand the procedures and problems and be able to encourage and instruct others. They must have not only the patience to equip new workers but also the insight and respect to be “creative buffers” between new workers and veterans as well as the line workers and management.

While I was attending seminary, I worked as a timekeeper at a branch of Rockwell Manufacturing Company. After you walked through the entrance and punched the clock, you saw a large sign that read

**The value of our employees is measured by the amount of supervision they require.**

That says it all! If my supervisor must constantly spend time explaining to me what I’m supposed to do and how I’m supposed to do it, and if he or she must repeatedly correct my mistakes, then I’m costing the company a great deal of money and not earning my salary. The best thing my supervisor could do for me and the company would be to find the place where I really belong, where I “take to” the job and have the ability to do it successfully. More money is wasted, more time is lost, and more trouble is generated by out-of-place workers than perhaps any other difficulty in corporate life, and this applies to management as well as line workers. The traditional “square peg in a round hole” may be a company vice president—or the president!

A brief word here to those serving in Christian ministries. The fact that a man is an effective preacher or a woman is a godly and gifted singer doesn’t guarantee that either one will be successful when it comes to the ministry of

management. For that matter, the founder of a ministry may be a good obstetrician but a poor pediatrician, unable to “raise” the child he or she has brought into the world. Often the founder becomes a “sanctified obstructionist” and fails to recognize when it’s time for new leadership. This “founder syndrome” has crippled and almost destroyed more than one ministry. Blessed is that board that can recognize these things and has the courage to deal with them creatively!

## **Provision**

Workers who give their best to their work deserve a management that gives its best to the workers, not only in salaries and benefits (Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7) but also in training, tools, and technology. Leaders need staff people who can help keep them up to date in these critical areas, people who know the difference between business tools and personal “toys.” It’s hard to believe that when the telephone was developed, some of the “experts” said it was a toy that had no practical use. A famous British physicist declared that radio had no future, and even Thomas Edison said that the “radio craze” would die out in time. Sometimes the wisdom of the wise is foolishness.

It’s been my privilege to pastor three churches, serve on the boards of several Christian ministries, and minister as a full-time staff member of two international parachurch ministries. I have learned some valuable lessons about what’s involved in raising ministry finances. In our first church, a faithful deacon used to remind us of the words of J. Hudson Taylor: “When God’s work is done in God’s way for God’s glory, it will not lack God’s support.” Amen and amen!

In Youth for Christ, we prayed, waited on the Lord, and trusted Him for what was needed. Then we joyfully (and sometimes tearfully) praised Him for His goodness. Along



with regular in-house prayer meetings, each month we left the YFCI office, went to a local church, and spent hours reviewing needs and opportunities and praying for God's direction and provision. At Back to the Bible, workers in each department had times of prayer at their desks at the beginning and ending of each work day, and there were also regular extended prayer chapels. Our founder Theodore Epp called serving at Back to the Bible "adventuring by faith."

At our first pastorate, the financial experts we consulted told us it was impossible for us to build the sanctuary we so desperately needed, but they had left God out of their formula—and He enabled us to do it! Like the author of Hebrews 11:32, I don't have time to relate how the Lord answered prayer in our second and third pastorates—Calvary Baptist Church in Covington, Kentucky, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, and historic Moody Church in Chicago. Both congregations and church staffs believed in prayer. It pains me when I hear that churches have abandoned the weekly prayer meeting and the prayer meetings before the Sunday services. Promotion seems to have replaced prayer.

When Jesus fed the five thousand (John 6), He met the needs of the people and at the same time taught His own disciples some important lessons in faith. Philip thought that the main problem was financial when it was really spiritual. Andrew found a boy with a small lunch that obviously couldn't feed such a crowd, *but God starts with what we have and turns it into what we need!* Jesus looked up to the Father, gave the Father everything He had, and asked the Father to bless it. The result was satisfaction for the people, glory to the Father, and a surplus of bread for the disciples. "Let nothing be wasted," said Jesus (John 6:12). He was a good steward of God's gracious provisions. Vance Havner called Jesus "the Lord of the leftovers."

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you,” said Jesus (Luke 11:9). This prayer promise covers everything. *Ask* makes available the Father’s wealth, *seek* leads us to the Father’s will, and *knock* opens the door to the Father’s work. (In Scripture, an open door signifies ministry opportunities. See 1 Cor. 16:9; Col. 4:3.) The Father will share His wealth with us if we obey His will so we can do His work. We have no right to expect the Father to support projects that ignore His will and have nothing to do with His work. God supports necessities, not luxuries. Along with praying for open doors, we are instructed to pray for laborers (Matt. 9:38), wisdom (James 1:5), and finances (Phil. 4:18–20).

Whether we are missionaries in a foreign land, managers of a neighborhood store, or partners in a multinational corporation, prayer is still God’s appointed way to accomplish His will on this earth. Our efficiency must depend on the Lord’s sufficiency. We are not equal to the task (2 Cor. 2:16), but the Lord can give us the spiritual competence we need (2 Cor. 3:5–6). He can also provide sufficient finances (2 Cor. 9:8–9) and sufficient grace to overcome obstacles and get the work done (2 Cor. 12:7–9).

## **Revision**

One of the churches I pastored had this marvelous clause in the church constitution: “Annually, the elders shall review the organization and ministries of the church and make recommendations for necessary changes.” Many boards and organizations don’t even have the word “change” in their vocabularies, but this one has it in the constitution! The first year I was their pastor, the elders made several recommendations that led to changes that streamlined the work and saved money as well.

The gifted British expositor G. Campbell Morgan had as his ministry motto, “The minimum of organization for the

maximum of work.” No doubt you have noted that obesity has become a major national concern, but there are “obese organizations” as well as obese people, and that extra corporate corpulence is difficult to handle and expensive to support.

Living bodies adapt and make changes in order to survive and grow, and so do living organizations if the leadership is wise. Bottlenecks are always at the top, and if year by year CEOs and board members insist on monitoring conformity and maintaining mediocrity, one day they will be looking for jobs. Every corporate problem we face is an opportunity for us to understand what needs to be done to make things go better. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead recommended “order in the midst of change and change in the midst of order.” That’s good counsel. Order without change can become paralysis, but change without order is chaos—and we don’t want either one.

In every healthy organization you will find unity, diversity, and maturity. Unity without diversity produces dull and dead uniformity, but diversity without unity creates unmanageable anarchy. The thing that keeps diversity from destroying unity and unity from destroying diversity is maturity, because mature people are able to accept changes, retain harmony, and keep things in balance. To reject change is to claim perfection, but always changing creates confusion. There is a dynamic among people and procedures that must be maintained if the organization is to succeed. Leaders must have stature as well as authority, for while authority captures the mind and will, stature moves the heart and helps motivate people to appreciate the company and try to do their best. Like the relationship between team members and coaches, there must be that invisible aura or ethos that makes the players proud to be under their coach’s command and anxious to do their best.

Review, reflection, and revision must go together, and they require honesty, patience, and courage. When some well-

meaning people use the word “conservative,” they really mean “preservative,” because they never want anything to change. The annual audit may reveal serious problems afoot, and the annual job reviews can help us discover where the problems originate. Leaders must challenge not only the performance and productivity of the company but also the processes and the people involved. It isn’t an easy task, but ignoring it or merely routinely skimming through it only makes the problems worse.

Experienced and maturing leaders develop a built-in “radar system” that helps them detect and define areas of weakness and flash points of potential trouble. We must remember that one of the responsibilities of leadership is to help others on the team discover and develop their own gifts and abilities, and this means we must face facts and deal with them honestly. “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Prov. 27:6). My doctors have occasionally hurt me, but they have never harmed me.

Changes usually bring concern and frustration to some and joy and freedom to others, but creative change will eventually defend itself among mature people. Some changes may need to be tweaked to make sure all the parts work and all the people involved are comfortable. Revision is not change to the company vision but the alteration of company methods and procedures so that what we do is more efficient and less costly. We revise things to make not only the employees happy but also the customers that the employees serve. If our suggested changes prove to be wrong, the leadership team takes the responsibility and makes no excuses. If our ideas succeed beyond our expectations, we give the credit to others and the glory to God.

That’s leadership.



Some leaders enjoy joking about boards and committees, giving the impression that these groups are only nuisances not to be taken too seriously. However, most organizations would be unable to function profitably (or perhaps even legally) without an official board of directors. As for committees, no leader can know everything, do everything, and be everywhere; we all need the assistance and encouragement of others who are also dedicated to the success of the organization. A few committees of the board can help the directors function more effectively and economically, and possibly shorten board discussions; and occasional ad hoc committees can help to expedite official projects and special events. It has been said that a committee is “a group of the unfit, appointed by the unwilling to do the unnecessary,” a definition I smile at even though I don’t agree with it.

Let’s begin with the board (note the spelling, not “bored”) and ask a question: “As a leader, what do you see when you look at the people who make up the board?” Do you see mules that you must push, racehorses you have to restrain, cows you want to “milk” for the good of the organization, or perhaps cats that need to be pampered and petted before they will pull in their claws? If we want to stay with the animal metaphor, I see board members as watchdogs

whose collective surveillance can detect problems that have eluded me and thereby give me time to make changes. To move into the vegetable kingdom, I see a board as a field where together we can plant seeds and reap harvests as the work grows. If we move into the human kingdom, a board is an army we can lead into battle and that can help us win the war, if only we know how best to utilize their skills.

I have served on various committees and boards, including the boards of a Christian university, an international radio broadcast, and two international missions, one of whose I chaired for ten years. Whether or not my participation was helpful you will have to learn from others, but I do know that it was helpful to me. It gave me insights into the workings of some effective organizations that are still functioning today, in spite of my service with them.



As leaders, we must accept board members as they are, respect them, and always play fair with them. One or two members may see catastrophe around every corner, and there is usually one member whose optimism is encouraging but not always sensible. “It will work out fine!” is the usual response to a disappointing report or financial statement. People have different backgrounds, personalities, and board experiences, and it’s the leader’s job to understand these varied backgrounds. Then we can better unite them in seeing clearly the obligations, obstacles, and opportunities we face, to make the wisest plans possible, and to expedite them.

We should get to know our board members without creating cliques or developing a “kitchen cabinet” that tries to second-guess the board executive committee. This doesn’t mean that every grain of information must be

revealed to everybody at the same time, but it does mean that there are no second- and third-class board members. (If their own indifference classifies them as such, that's their own fault and they need our help.) The meeting agenda must be sent out in good time, along with any necessary supplementary materials, so that each director or committee member can come to the table as prepared as he or she wants to be. We hope they come well-prepared, and we must be better prepared than they as we anticipate obstacles and questions.

Whenever I was chairperson or a new member of a board, I found it helpful to listen carefully to what people said *and how they said it*, as well as to try to read their faces, noticing frowns, smiles, and blank looks. As chairperson, I discreetly kept my eyes moving from face to face around the table to see if any members wanted to speak but had been ignored or "talked down." A chairperson is like a charioteer who is trying to control fifteen horses in a fog on an unknown track, and not all of them always want to go the same direction. Be of good cheer: it can be done! I have also been helped by identifying the person or persons to whom most of the members direct their remarks when they aren't addressing the chair, because this helps me identify the "power people" around the table.

As much as possible, board membership must be balanced, so that you have access to the minds and hearts of people with a wide variety of experiences and vocations. To bring up another metaphor, a board should be like a treasure chest, filled with valuable insight and information.

The longer you serve together, the more you will be fascinated to learn how the Lord has prepared and equipped them for their tasks.



**L**eaders must know themselves and not lie to themselves about either their weaknesses or their strengths. Leaders aren't threatened if somebody else on the staff can do some things better than they can. They acknowledge it and make use of it. At the same time, leaders must be constantly learning and growing in their skills. Once they get weary of their work and the vision starts to fade, they will begin cutting corners, avoiding sacrifices, and making excuses. If they think more of personal security than of team competence or corporate success, and if they have lost the kind of confidence that takes risks, they may be heading for another assignment or for retirement. As we noted at the beginning of this book, leaders are people, and people don't maintain their high-level performance forever.

Built into this scenario is the responsibility of the leader to prepare for his or her successor. In a family enterprise, there may be a child or grandchild in the wings who is capable of taking over. A friend of mine bypassed his son and put a daughter at the head of the family-owned business, and she is doing a splendid job. Of course, the company board has something to say about our choices, so the leader had better keep them posted and not wait until the last minute to get the machinery going. *And retirees*



*must prepare themselves for retirement lest they waste the golden opportunities they will have during those years.*

A wise old adage states three essentials for happiness: someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to. Blessed are the retired leaders who have families and friends to love and to serve. Even more blessed are those leaders who are busy, not only with hobbies and travel but, even more, with mentoring and encouraging others and sharing what they know. When you sit down and figure it all out, a lifetime of experience is an expensive thing, and it's a shame to waste it. Our best investment is in the lives of the young men and women who will be the future leaders.

When my doctors told me to abandon the highways and skyways and stay home, I asked the Lord to give me some dedicated young men to mentor, and He abundantly answered my prayer. It's been a joy to meet with them and study the Word together, as well as to talk about ministry and leadership and what it means to build the church. I tell people that my young friends have helped me catch up on the present while I've helped them catch up on the past. I've given them books to read and have introduced them to the ministries of the giants of the past who have much to say to the leaders of the present. I've watched these young men mature in the faith, go off to seminary for further training, get married and have children, start churches, and serve churches to the glory of God.

God gave me people to love, a work to do, and something to look forward to. Of course, the anticipation of seeing the Lord is our greatest anticipation. Daily I ask the Lord to help me end well. I hope I will be able to say to my Savior what He said to His Father: "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

I invite you to join me!

## Notes

- [1]. 1. This is a quotation from a speech given at Binghamton, NY, October 24, 1910. I have adjusted the quotation slightly to make the statement apply to both male and female leaders.
- [2]. 1. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 1.
- [3]. 1. See Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, *The Biography of James Hudson Taylor* (London: China Inland Mission Fellowship, 1965), 247. I also highly recommend their book *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, available in various editions.
- [4]. 1. W. R. Inge, *Outspoken Essays, 1922* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2003), 185.
- [5]. 1. Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 34.
- [6]. 1. See chapter 14 of my book *God Isn't in a Hurry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).
- [7]. 2. Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 105.
- [8]. 1. Nathan Stone, *The Names of God in the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1944), 43. Nathan Stone was a godly Hebrew Christian and a gifted teacher of the Word.
- [9]. 1. Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
- [10]. 1. Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters from the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 278.
- [11]. 2. Ibid., 284.
- [12]. 1. Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000).
- [13]. 2. Most translations read “in my Father’s house” or “about the things of my Father.”

- [14]. 3. See Psalm 69:8; Mark 3:21; Luke 8:19; Acts 1:14.
- [15]. 4. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Athenium, 1987), 6.
- [16]. 1. S. Angus, *The Environment of Early Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 9-10.
- [17]. 2. Eric Hoffer, *First Things, Last Things* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 130.
- [18]. 3. Eric Hoffer, *Reflections on the Human Condition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 22.
- [19]. 1. Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3.

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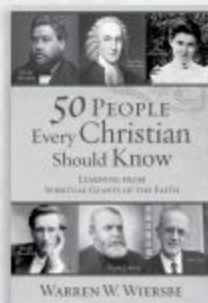
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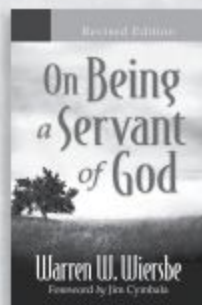
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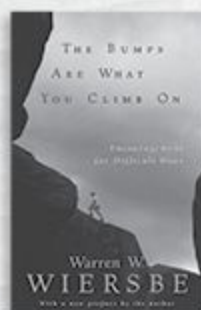
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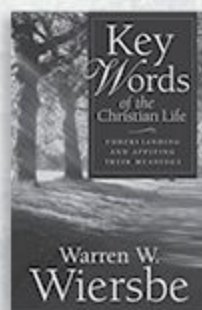
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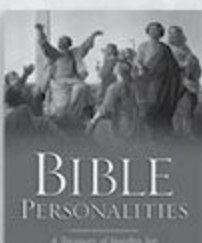


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